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# CONSTANTINOPLE

## CAPITAL OF BYZANTIUM

JONATHAN HARRIS



*Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*

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# *Abbreviations*

*B = Byzantion*

*BMGS = Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*

*BZ = Byzantinische Zeitschrift*

*DOP = Dumbarton Oaks Papers*

*JHS = Journal of Hellenic Studies*

*REB = Revue des Études Byzantines*

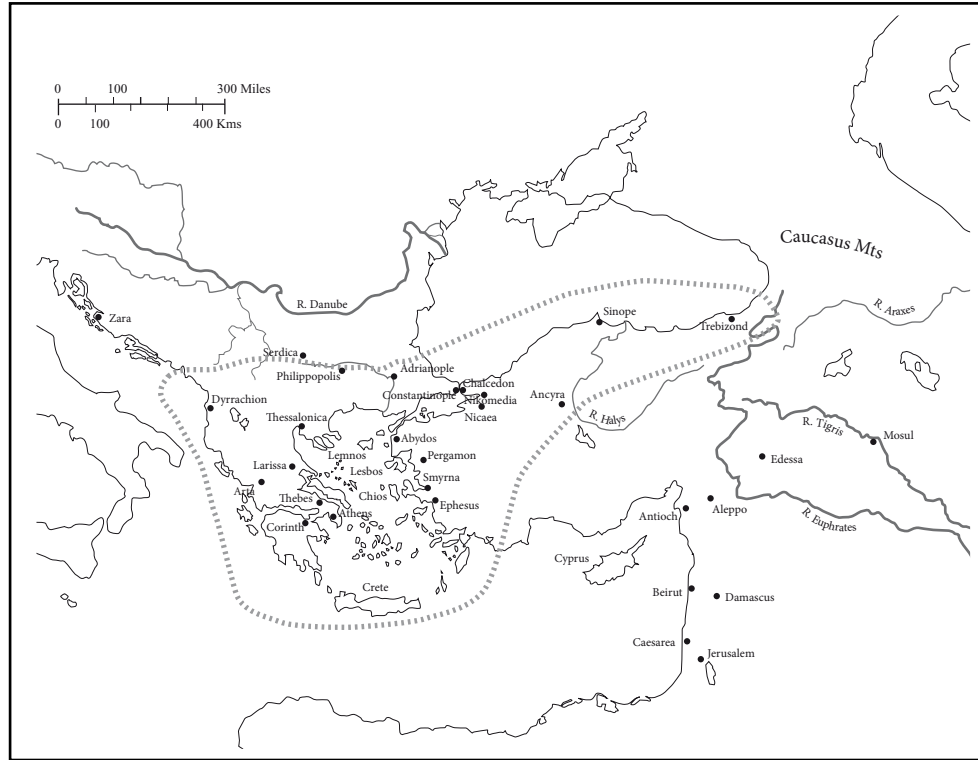
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- 1 The city of Constantinople
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2 The Byzantine empire in 1200



3 The Byzantine empire in 1265



# *Acknowledgements*

I am well aware that the title of this book might cause some eyebrows to be raised. After all, Constantinople and Byzantium are but two names for the same city. The fact is that nowadays the word ‘Byzantium’ has come to have a dual meaning. It can be used to denote the city of Constantinople before its transformation by Constantine but it can also be a way of referring to the Byzantine empire and civilization as a whole. In a book like this, such double usage could lead to endless misunderstandings. I have therefore used the spelling ‘Byzantion’ when referring to the ancient, pre-Constantine city and reserved ‘Byzantium’ for the wider empire. So this is a book about Constantinople’s thousand-year reign as the capital of the Byzantine empire.

It is a very wide-ranging theme that also touches on aspects of Constantinople’s history both before and after its Byzantine phase, from its first foundation in about 800 BCE to the present day. In treating it I inevitably strayed into all kinds of territory in which I have no expertise whatsoever and was reliant on the scholarly basis laid by others, particularly Gilbert Dagron, Ken Dark, Paul Magdalino and Cyril Mango. I hope that I have done adequate justice to them in the footnotes, but it is worth recording the debt here as well. That said, the same very broad theme inevitably required selectivity, so I hope that other academic colleagues will forgive me if they find their work omitted from the bibliography. Considerations of space meant that not everything could be included. For the same reason, wherever possible I have cited contemporary sources in English translation only,

## *Acknowledgements*

even when these are not necessarily the most accurate or up-to-date editions.

In the course of writing, I received much valued encouragement from many friends and colleagues, especially Judith Herrin, Tony Morris, Nigel Saul, Jonathan Shepard and Martin Sheppard, and I benefited from information passed to me by Robert Hughes, Ian Wadsley and others. Eugenia Russell and Andrew Sargent kindly read an early draft and saved me from many errors, linguistic, factual and stylistic. Those that remain are entirely my fault, not theirs. Eva Osborne, Michael Greenwood, Slav Todorov and Anya Wilson of Continuum ably handled the editorial side. Special mention needs to be made of Michael Heslop and Helen Boss Heslop, under whose hospitable roof the last stages of the book were written, Jan Parkin, with whom I first explored the streets of Istanbul, Emmett Sullivan who advised on computer matters, and Marie-Christine Ockenden without whom I would have sunk without trace beneath my college administrative duties. I am enormously indebted to Karina Cabeza-Boedinghaus who drew the maps. Finally a note of appreciation to the students who have taken my BA and MA options at Royal Holloway over the years. Their healthy scepticism and refreshing irreverence works wonders in getting matters into their true perspective.

As regards the vexed question of the spelling of Byzantine names in the text and footnotes, I have used those versions which seem to me to be most natural and familiar. While, in general, I have tried to transliterate them as closely as possible to the original Greek – Angelos rather than Angelus, and Doukas rather than Ducas – I cannot claim complete consistency. Where there is a recognized English equivalent of a Greek Christian name, I have used it. Hence I have preferred Isaac to Isaakios, Andronicus to Andronikos and Constantine to Konstantinos. Similarly, with surnames, where a Latinized version has become standard, it has been used, most notably Anna Comnena rather than Anna Komnene. When dealing with individuals who lived before 600 CE, I have tended to use the Latinized version: Procopius rather than Prokopios and Eusebius rather than Eusebios or even Evsevios. The reader will still find exceptions, though. For example, Heraclius (610–41) is not called ‘Herakleios’.

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# *Introduction*

It is worth saying at the outset what this book is not. It is not a survey of the surviving Byzantine buildings of Istanbul. That task has already been carried out superbly by John Freely and Ahmet Çakmak. Nor is it a chronological history of the Byzantine empire. Readers of English who require such an overview will find it in the works of Michael Angold, Timothy Gregory, Donald M. Nicol, George Ostrogorsky, Warren Treadgold and others.

Rather this is a book about power and about how those who have wielded it most successfully and enduringly have hidden its realities beneath a veil of grandeur and myth. Constantinople in Byzantine times was a perfect example. Its ruler, the Byzantine emperor, was surrounded by elaborate and colourful ceremonial and there was scarcely a major building or institution in the city whose origin was not traced back to some kind of divine command or intervention or to some fantastic legend.

This preference for the miraculous and supernatural over the physical and quantifiable presents the historian of Constantinople with a problem. On the one hand, the myths and legends could be seen simply as superstition that obscures the true picture. After all, Constantinople in its heyday was a centre of wealth and power every bit as influential as Washington DC, New York, Tokyo, Paris or London are today. To spend much time examining the tall tales, it could be argued, would perpetuate the idea of Byzantium as some exotic and mysterious wonderland, hovering uneasily on the border of dream and reality. Such a

picture might be appropriate to the poems of W. B. Yeats but it hardly does justice to the important political, social and economic realities.<sup>1</sup> Most histories of the Byzantine empire therefore pass over the myths and legends entirely and concentrate on more concrete matters.

On the other hand, these elements cannot be abandoned altogether, since they were clearly extremely important in the minds not only of medieval visitors to Constantinople but also of the Byzantines themselves. Indeed, the rulers of Constantinople assiduously cultivated them and went out of their way to promote a spiritual aura around their city. Thus in 917, the patriarch of Constantinople, who was acting as regent for an underage emperor, wrote to the khan of the Bulgars to warn him not to attack Constantinople. He did not threaten the khan with military force but with the Virgin Mary who, he insisted, was the 'commander in chief' of the city and would not take kindly to any presumptuous assault.<sup>2</sup>

The fact is that far from being completely unrelated to Constantinople's wealth and power, myths, legends and beliefs like this were one of the ways in which the Byzantine emperors bolstered their position, hiding stark everyday reality behind a claim to divine favour. It is this intriguing interaction between the spiritual and the political, the mythical and the actual that forms the main preoccupation of this book. Of the many shibboleths and myths with which the Byzantine emperors surrounded themselves, there are perhaps six which stand out. First and foremost it was an article of faith that Constantinople had been founded by a saintly emperor who had designed it to be the centre of government for the whole Christian world. Secondly, it was believed that the city from the first enjoyed the special protection of God and the Virgin Mary and that it would remain unconquered until the end of the world. Thirdly, there was the political myth that emperors who ruled there were divinely appointed. Fourthly, the city was claimed to be a holy place like Rome or Jerusalem, its church having been founded by an Apostle and its churches filled with relics of the saints. Fifth, its wealth reflected this divine favour and was therefore greater than that of any city anywhere in the world. Finally, the emperor, the source of all benefits for the Christian people, ruled like God, entirely alone. All six myths masked a reality that

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was greatly at variance with the ideal, but the ideal played a vital role in justifying the reality.

The chapters that follow explore the complex interaction between the mythical and the everyday in the capital city of the Byzantine empire, focusing for convenience on one particular moment in Constantinople's long history: the year 1200 CE. It is not an attempt to debunk myth. For the myth was central to Byzantine power and a major factor in Constantinople's extraordinary success in preserving itself and its empire for over a thousand years. For when the myth died, the power and the wealth perished too.

## CHAPTER 1

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# *The City of Wonders*

In about the year 1110, according to the sagas of the Norse kings, Sigurd I Magnusson of Norway and a band of followers were sailing back to their distant northern homeland after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. As they crossed the eastern Mediterranean in their longships, they stopped off for a time to pay a visit to the city of Miklagarth. Their reception was magnificent. The ruler of Miklagarth, whose name was Kirialax, had covered the streets from the harbour to the palace with precious cloth in their honour, and as they rode along these richly adorned thoroughfares the Norwegians were serenaded by choirs and lute players. On reaching Kirialax's palace, the visitors were ushered into a lavish banquet, and purses full of silver and gold coins were handed to them as they took their seats. As if this largesse were not enough, the servants reappeared shortly afterwards bearing great chests filled with gold which were distributed in the same way. Finally they brought in a cloak of costly purple cloth and two gold rings for King Sigurd who stood and made an elegant speech, thanking Kirialax for his generosity. Afterwards, the Norwegians were treated to a display of horsemanship, music and fireworks on a flat plain surrounded by banks of seating. Above the seats were bronze statues that were so skilfully wrought that they looked as if they were alive. When King Sigurd finally left, he presented Kirialax with all of his longships and continued his journey by land. Many of his men, however, chose to remain behind and to enter the service of the ruler of this splendid city.<sup>1</sup>

One might be forgiven for thinking that this entire episode was just another of the fantastic and implausible tales that fill the pages of the Norse sagas. Yet in its essentials the story is probably true. For Miklagarth was a real place. Its proper name was Constantinople and it was the capital city of what is known to history as the Byzantine empire or Byzantium, which in the early twelfth century dominated much of the Balkans and part of what is now Turkey. The inhabitants of the city who welcomed the Norwegians so cordially were the Byzantines, a Greek-speaking Christian people who regarded their empire as a continuation of the old Roman empire. Likewise their ruler, 'Kiri-lax', was a real person, the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118). His odd name in the saga no doubt arose from his being referred to by his subjects as *Kyr Alexios*, 'the Lord Alexios'.

It is not, however, just the place and its ruler that can be verified from the Saga's account. Its tale of the wonders and wealth of Constantinople is reproduced in a host of travellers' memoirs from the Middle Ages, left behind by pilgrims, soldiers and diplomats, many of them more sober and convincing than the saga yet often breathless with astonishment at what they saw. The almost universal reaction was that recorded by a French visitor of 1203 who noticed that, as his ship drew near to Constantinople, those who had never been there before 'gazed very intently at the city, having never imagined that there could be so fine a place in all the world'. It was 'an excellent and beautiful city', 'rich in renown' and 'the noblest of capitals of the world'.<sup>2</sup> Nor was Constantinople's impact only felt by newcomers. It was also a source of immense pride to its inhabitants. So magnificent a place did they consider it that they seldom even referred to it by name. They preferred to use epithets such as the 'Queen of Cities' (*basileuoussa*), the 'Great City' (*megalopolis*) or simply 'the City' (*polis*), there being no possible doubt as to which city was being referred to.<sup>3</sup>

What was it about Constantinople that produced this almost universal admiration and awe? Perhaps the most obvious feature was its size. Visitors coming from the Islamic world would have been familiar with large prosperous cities, notably Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate, and Cordoba in Spain, though even they were impressed by what they saw. Those like Sigurd and his followers, from Scandinavia,



western Europe and Russia, on the other hand, would never have seen such a vast urban area. Their world was an undeveloped one where much of the land was still covered in primal forest. Those cities that there were had a population of no more than about 20,000 people at the very most, and the stone churches in villages would have been the largest man-made structures that most people would ever see. By contrast, Constantinople had such a profusion of houses, churches, monasteries and palaces, many built on a colossal scale, 'that no one would have believed it to be true if he had not seen it with his own eyes'. The area enclosed by its walls was almost 30,000 hectares (eleven and a half square miles) and within that area lived a population that must have numbered hundreds of thousands: more, it was asserted, than lived in the whole of England between York and the Thames.<sup>4</sup> Constantinople would therefore have been like nothing that visitors from the west had encountered before, and their reaction was one of open-mouthed astonishment.

There was, however, much more to medieval Constantinople than just its size. Over the centuries, its buildings and monuments had become enmeshed with legends and Christian myths which gave the place a spiritual aura to match its physical grandeur. The potency of this heady mixture is easily missed by a modern observer, so perhaps the best way to appreciate the impact that Constantinople would have had is to follow the path that would have been taken by a visitor who arrived in the city in around 1200 and to consider what they would have seen and, perhaps more importantly, what they would have felt.

There were, and are, two ways to approach Constantinople: by land and by sea. Both offered a striking foretaste of what was to come. King Sigurd and his companions came by sea, and would have been greeted by the sight of the city, its skyline punctuated by tall columns and by domes of churches and surrounded by the defensive Sea Walls. Most visitors, however, came by land, and their first inkling of the city beyond would come when the towers of immense defensive Land Walls that stretched from the Golden Horn to the Sea of Marmara came into view and barred any further progress. These visitors would have to apply for entry through one of the nine gates. There

was a tenth, the Golden Gate, an impressive structure topped with two bronze elephants and covered in classical reliefs from an earlier age. That, however, was reserved for emperors returning from victorious campaigns and normally remained closed.<sup>5</sup> Formalities at this stage could be tedious, since the authorities forbade any weapons to be carried inside the walls, and only allowed groups of five or six persons to enter at hourly intervals.<sup>6</sup> Eventually permission would be given and the visitors would probably enter through the Gate of Charisios, also known as the Gate of Adrianople, as this led to the broad Middle Street or *Mese* that ran through the centre of the city.<sup>7</sup>

Gaining access through the Land Walls only brought the visitor into the outlying areas of the city, where much of the land was given over to vineyards, orchards, vegetable plots and cornfields.<sup>8</sup> There were, however, several large monasteries close to the Walls, notably that of the Holy Saviour in Chora which lay near the Gate of Adrianople and that of St John Stoudios, near the Golden Gate. There was also an important imperial residence, the Palace of Blachernae, at the northern extremity of the Land Walls.

It would have taken some time to pass through these less heavily built-up western quarters of the city on foot and to reach the more densely built-up areas, a distance of over four and a half kilometres or some three miles. As they moved along the narrowing promontory on which Constantinople was built, visitors would have soon been aware of the proximity of the sea. They would have smelt the salt in the breeze, heard the cry of seagulls and glimpsed the blue water between the buildings. This was Constantinople's harbour, the Golden Horn, whose southern shore would have been crowded with ships, their masts and rigging standing out against the sky.

Walking east along the *Mese*, they would have arrived first at one of Constantinople's major monuments. A very large church would have stood on the left-hand side of the street, cruciform in structure and topped by five domes. The Holy Apostles was the second largest church in Constantinople and was dedicated to Christ's Twelve Apostles, excluding Judas but including St Paul. A poem was inscribed over its main door, recounting how each of them met his end:

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Mark is put to death by the people of Alexandria.  
The great sleep of life Matthew sleeps.  
Rome sees Paul die by the sword.  
Philip is given what was given Peter.  
Bartholomew suffers death on the cross.  
Simon too on the cross ends his life.  
In Rome vain Nero crucifies Peter.  
In life and death John lives.  
Luke died peacefully at the end.  
The men of Patras brutally crucify Andrew.  
A knife severs the life paths of James.  
Lances kill Thomas in India.<sup>9</sup>

Through the doorway, the church's cavernous interior was covered in glittering mosaics depicting the life of Christ and the deeds of the Apostles.<sup>10</sup> Visitors who stopped off here would have been shown the Heröon, a round mausoleum, situated to the east of the main church. It housed the tombs of the emperors of Byzantium who had been regularly buried there until 1028 when the mausoleum had become full up. Here in their imposing marble sarcophagi that were made of rare purple or green marble, often overlaid with gold leaf, these imperial personages awaited the last trump. The very magnificence of their resting place was designed to convey to visitors that these were no ordinary rulers, but the heirs of the Caesars, who had occupied an office ordained by God for the benefit of all Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Back on the Mese, the road continued its progress eastwards into the busy and heavily populated quarters. By now, sections of the street were porticoed on either side, providing a sheltered pavement for pedestrians and for shops behind. Tall mansions belonging to Constantinople's great and good fronted onto the thoroughfare.<sup>12</sup> To the left, beyond the Holy Apostles, marched the arches of the Aque-duct of Valens, bearing water into the city from the streams and rivers of Thrace.<sup>13</sup> On the right-hand side stood a basilica, the church of St Polyeuktos, built in the sixth century but now rather dilapidated.<sup>14</sup> The visitors would also have seen nearby a nine-metre-high column of pink granite, protruding above the roof tops. Originally erected in

honour of the Emperor Marcian (450–7), it was one of many scattered around the city, bearing the names of long-dead emperors, which one contemporary described as ‘looming like massive giants’.<sup>15</sup> Shortly afterwards, the Mese joined up with the other main street, the Triumphal Way, which ran up from the Golden Gate, and the route then led into a large square known as the Forum of Theodosius, also called the Forum of Tauros.

The Forum of Theodosius was the largest public square in Constantinople, with a triumphal arch standing to one side. It would have been very striking to visitors from western Europe where such towns as there possessed no open public space to speak of, the houses being packed in tightly within the walls. In all probability, the Forum would have looked something like Trafalgar Square in London or the Place Vendôme in Paris, because it was dominated by a stone column that stood at its centre, this one bearing the name of the Emperor Theodosius I (379–95). Rather like Trajan’s column in Rome, the outside of the column was decorated with spiral reliefs depicting Theodosius’s victories. Compared with Trajan’s, however, this column was gigantic, standing over forty metres (120 feet) high. There was a doorway in the pedestal and a spiral stairway inside that gave access to the top. It must have towered above the square and there can have been few visitors who did not crane their necks to peer up at it. If they hoped to get a glimpse of the statue of the emperor, they would have been disappointed, for in the year 480 an earthquake had brought it crashing down and it was never replaced. Still intact, however, was the nearby equestrian statue of the Emperor Theodosius, the hoof of his horse crushing a small bound and kneeling man, who no doubt represented some conquered foe. As a memorial to its subject, however, the statue had long since lost its purpose, for by the twelfth century no one could remember who it was supposed to represent.<sup>16</sup>

From the Forum of Theodosius it would have been possible to see its column’s twin, that of Theodosius’s son, Arcadius (395–408), in another public square over on the Triumphal Way. It was equally tall, with 233 steps inside and fifty-six windows, and it must have been visible over the rooftops even from distant parts of the city.<sup>17</sup> On leaving the Forum of Theodosius, the street led on to another square, the Forum of

Constantine, named for one of the greatest emperors and the founder of the city, Constantine the Great (306–37). The forum was an oval-shaped space with a portico along the length of its periphery, and its centrepiece was another towering column, this one made of reddish Porphyry marble. The column had originally been surmounted with a bronze statue, with seven rays emanating from its head, which was probably a reused image of the pagan god Apollo but was later believed to depict Constantine. Like the statue of Theodosius, this had now vanished, although it had met its end relatively recently. On a spring day in 1106, a particularly strong gust of wind had toppled the statue and sent it plummeting into the forum below where it had killed several unfortunate passers-by. It had since been replaced by a simple cross. The column itself was also showing signs of wear and tear and for some time had had to be held together with stout iron hoops to prevent it from falling down.<sup>18</sup>

As well as the column, the Forum of Constantine possessed another curious feature that would have excited the interest of those passing through it for the first time. All around it, somewhat incongruously in such an overtly Christian city, stood a number of ancient Greek statues of pagan goddesses. There was a nine-metre-high bronze image of Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom, helmeted with her hand stretched out towards the south, possibly the work of the Athenian sculptor, Phidias (c. 490–c. 420 BCE). Nearby was a colossal representation of Hera, the queen of heaven and wife of Zeus, and a depiction of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, being presented with the Apple of Discord by Paris, the episode that was said ultimately to have led to the Trojan War.<sup>19</sup>

These were, in fact, just a few of the many classical statues that were to be found scattered around the highways and squares of Constantinople. Others were to be found in the Forum of the Bull on the Triumphal Way and in the Forum Amastrianon, including a Zeus in a marble chariot, a reclining Hercules and even a winged Priapus, his hallmark feature proudly held in his left hand.<sup>20</sup> Pagan statues such as these appear to have been preserved and cherished by the Byzantines of the twelfth century for their artistic merits alone, but to visitors, unused to realistic portrayals of the human figure they must have been

a source of wonder. Hence the remark of the author of the Norse saga that the bronze statues of Constantinople were so skilfully wrought that they looked as if they were alive.

From the Forum of Constantine, the Mese progressed rapidly to the monumental heart of Byzantine Constantinople and opened into the last of the great squares, the Augousteion. Although probably smaller than the Forum of Theodosius, the Augousteion would have been just as impressive, partly because it brought the visitor face-to-face with the towering bulk of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, also known as St Sophia or the Holy Wisdom. Outside the cathedral, another tall column stood out starkly against the sky, this one with its bronze statue intact. Justinian I (527–65) was depicted seated on a horse, facing east and holding in one hand an orb surmounted by a cross, while his other hand was raised in warning to his enemies. The statue was a favourite with the local herons who regularly built their nests on the emperor's head and along the horse's back, and the wind gusting around the Augousteion would whistle mournfully around it.<sup>21</sup> On the eastern side of the square stood the Brazen Gate, a domed structure that formed the main entrance and vestibule to the Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors.

Apart from the cathedral and the column, the Augousteion was filled with curiosities. There was the Horologion, a mechanical clock, one of whose twenty-four doors flew open at the appropriate hour of the day. There was the *Anemodoulion* or 'the servant of the winds', a four-sided structure that was as tall as many of the city's columns and whose sides were intricately carved with animals and birds but also with a riotous scene of naked women pelting each other with apples. On top of it stood the bronze figure of a woman that served as a kind of weathervane and turned with the direction of the wind. Nearby was the Milion, a triumphal arch, which was surmounted by statues of the Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena, standing on either side of a cross. The arch covered a milestone from which all distances were measured. To one side of the square stood the Senate House, which was decorated with ancient columns and statues.<sup>22</sup>

To the south of the Augousteion stretched the Hippodrome, a long stadium some 400 metres in length which could seat up to 100,000

people. It had originally been designed for the staging of chariot races, and so at the Augousteion end it had twelve gates that could be opened simultaneously at the start of the contest. From there, the chariots raced to the far end of the track, wheeled around the central spine and galloped back to head for the winning post. By the twelfth century, however, the Hippodrome provided the venue for all kinds of public happening, from music and fireworks to displays of tightrope walking, and was by no means reserved for chariot racing. In the year 961, for example, it had been used to display the booty brought back by the successful expedition to reconquer the island of Crete. It was also where executions of prominent people took place and it played a key role in imperial ceremonial, which was why it had a special box, or *Kathisma*, for the emperor that could be reached by a covered walkway from the Great Palace. Evidently the hippodrome was the flat plain with banks of seating described by the author of the Norse saga.<sup>23</sup>

The Hippodrome was decorated with another set of ancient artefacts, which must have been some of the most diverse and whimsical in the entire city. On its central spine stood a granite Egyptian obelisk which was decorated with hieroglyphs and stood on a marble plinth that depicted Theodosius I surrounded by his family and courtiers. Further down the spine was a four-sided, thirty-two-metre-high masonry obelisk. No one could remember who had put it there or why, but some 200 years earlier Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (945–59) had decided to improve its appearance by covering it with gilded plates of bronze. It is therefore usually referred to as the column of Constantine Porphyrogenitus.<sup>24</sup>

There was also a profusion of classical statuary scattered around the place, with a plethora of animals complementing the usual gods and goddesses. The gods included a pensive Hercules by Lysippus of Sikyon, the famous sculptor of the fourth century BCE. Among the animals were four gilded copper horses, ‘their necks somewhat curved as if they eyed each other as they raced around the last lap’, as one contemporary put it, and they stood on a tower above the starting gates. There were also an eagle, a wolf and an elephant. Most celebrated of all was a bronze statue of the Calydonian boar, with realistic bristles

down its back, which according to legend was sent to ravage the lands of the king of Calydon after he neglected his sacrifices to Artemis.<sup>25</sup>

Some of the monuments in the Hippodrome had long histories behind them. The Serpent Column, a bronze sculpture of three intertwined serpents whose heads looked out in three directions, had originally been dedicated at Delphi in Greece in 478 BCE to commemorate the resounding defeat of the Persians by the Greeks at the battle of Plataea. A bronze statue of an ass being driven by its keeper had originally been set up by the Roman Emperor Augustus (31 BCE–14 CE), close to the site of his victory over Mark Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BCE. On the eve of the battle, Augustus had met with a man and his ass and on asking who he was and where he was going received the answer ‘I am Eutychus [Prosper], my ass is called Nikon [Victory] and I am going to Caesar’s camp.’ With hindsight, Augustus decided that this must have been an omen from the gods and commissioned the statue as a thank-offering. Both monuments had adorned the central spine of the Hippodrome for centuries.<sup>26</sup>

Intriguing though the Hippodrome was, for most visitors the most memorable sight of Constantinople was its cathedral of Hagia Sophia. Sheer size was part of it. The building was topped with an enormous dome thirty-two metres across and over fifty-five metres high, which would have been higher even than the columns of Theodosius, Arcadius and Constantine. On the inside, the sense of size and space was even more striking. So high was the roof that a mosaic figure of Christ high up in the dome, which looked to an observer on the pavement below as if it were of normal human size, was in fact so large that its eyes were three palms length apart. So vast was the space enclosed with no apparent means of support, that the dome seemed almost to float in the air, a veritable ‘tent of the Heavens’.<sup>27</sup>

The effect was enhanced by the mosaic decoration which covered the entire space of the dome, and the columns of different coloured marble, red, purple and green, which supported the galleries. From the forty small windows around the base of the dome, sunlight suffused the building from different angles at different hours of the day, shining in from the upper windows and illuminating the gold mosaics and marble columns with dazzling light. A ‘golden stream of



glittering rays', as one poet wrote, shortly after the cathedral's second consecration in 562, 'strikes the eyes of men, so that they can scarcely bear to look'.<sup>28</sup> Emerging into the daylight and the broad space of the Augousteion, many visitors must have concluded, as one Spaniard did, that:

The church is so immense in size, and so wonderful are the sights to be seen there that, spending many hours of time it were impossible to make a complete examination. Even though the visitor should day by day return seeing all he could, yet always on the morrow there would be new sights to view.<sup>29</sup>

Glancing around the great squares such as the Augousteion, visitors from less favoured regions would have noticed another of Constantinople's claims to fame, its conspicuous prosperity. 'Wealth like that of Constantinople', wrote one, 'is not to be found in the whole world'. What amazed them was the sheer abundance of gold, silver and silks on display in the streets and churches. The market stalls would have been crammed with exotic goods from far-off lands, and on the stalls of the money-changers piles of gold and silver coins and precious stones could be seen. Richly dressed noblemen with flowing beards and tall hats would have passed by on horseback or carried in a litter on their way to or from the emperor's palace. Inside the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, the altar was made of gold and studded with jewels, while the altar rail and pulpit were overlaid with silver. Such riches were not reserved for Constantinople's greatest church. Many others could boast a similar adornment. Even the relatively obscure church of the Forty Martyrs possessed an icon or picture of Christ whose frame was covered in gold and gems.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most visible expressions of Constantinople's wealth was the ability of the Byzantine emperor to offer apparently inexhaustible largesse to foreign dignitaries whom he was attempting to impress. The gifts showered on Sigurd of Norway and his party were by no means unprecedented. The Turkish sultan Kilij Arslan II (1156–92) received 'gold and silver coins, luxuriant raiment, silver beakers, golden Theriklean vessels, linens of the finest weave and other choice

ornaments' when he visited Constantinople in 1162. For the Norman prince Bohemond of Taranto, an entire room was filled with gold, silver and silk garments. An envoy from Italy had only to drop a hint to be presented by the emperor at once with a large cloak and a pound of gold coins.<sup>31</sup> As with the size of Constantinople, the source of the amazement was often the contrast with conditions back home. In western Europe especially, economic conditions were primitive. Money did not circulate widely and gold coins were something that most people would never see. The ability of the Byzantine emperor to shower bagfuls of them on his guests must have seemed little short of a miracle.

It would be wrong, however, to believe that visitors to Constantinople were impressed solely by its size, great buildings and wealth. On the contrary, some travellers' accounts scarcely mention these aspects. They were much more interested in something else: Constantinople's reputation as a holy place.

At first sight, it is not immediately obvious why Constantinople should have been accorded any spiritual significance by medieval Christians. After all, the city had played no part in the Gospel story, for it had not even been founded in its present form at the time of Christ. So while pilgrims to Jerusalem could visit the very places where Jesus had walked and taught, and those to Rome could follow in the footsteps of the Apostles Peter and Paul, there was nothing of that kind in Constantinople. On the other hand, it did possess the next best thing, an unrivalled collection of relics, which its rulers had built up over the centuries. Relics could be either mortal remains of saints and holy persons or objects closely associated with them or with the Virgin Mary or even with Christ himself. Such objects were regarded with intense veneration by medieval Christians because they represented a tangible link to the sanctity of the person with whom they were connected. It was believed that prayers made in a place sanctified by the presence of such an object would be all the more efficacious and that in some cases they might even perform miraculous cures.

Constantinople's relic collection was the envy of the Christian world. It has been reckoned that there were some 3,600 of them, representing about 476 different saints. The pick of the collection, which included

what was believed to be the Crown of Thorns and other instruments of Christ's passion, was locked away in the chapel of the Holy Virgin of Pharos within the Great Palace and was only shown to high-ranking visitors. There were, however, plenty of others available to public view. In the church of the Holy Apostles, one could see a stone pillar which purported to be that against which Christ had been scourged, along with the tombs of the apostle St Andrew, St Luke the evangelist and St Timothy. The church of the monastery of the Pantokrator boasted the slab of red marble on which Christ had lain after his crucifixion, which still bore the marks of the tears shed by the Virgin Mary.<sup>32</sup> Visitors to Hagia Sophia could gaze upon the stone well cover upon which Christ sat when he conversed with the woman of Samaria, and the table on which the Last Supper had been laid out.<sup>33</sup> The reaction of visitors when confronted with such relics was one of touching enthusiasm, undiluted by any scepticism as to whether these objects were actually what they were supposed to be.

Constantinople's religious aura went far beyond its role of merely providing a setting for numerous relics, however. Such was the antiquity of the city, and so many centuries had passed without it having been captured or sacked by any hostile power, that it had come to acquire a mystical quality in its own right, and a host of myths and legends had become attached to many of its monuments. Even the most everyday objects had become imbued with a spiritual significance. The pillars that supported the galleries of Hagia Sophia, for example, were supposed to have special healing powers when rubbed by afflicted persons, particular columns specializing in certain ailments. Even the bolt on one of the main doors was believed to have the power to cure dropsy when the sufferer placed it in his mouth.<sup>34</sup>

Similar miraculous properties were attributed to other monuments around the city, particularly to the towering columns. The spiral reliefs on the columns of Theodosius and Arcadius, for example, were thought to depict the future events that would befall Constantinople. Unfortunately, they would only become comprehensible once those events had taken place. It was said that there used to be a statue of Aphrodite on a column outside a brothel which had a peculiar power. Whenever an unchaste woman walked past, her skirts would fly up, whereas virtuous

women were unaffected. There were no reports of any columns that had a similar effect on men.<sup>35</sup> The classical statues, especially those in the Hippodrome, also attracted their share of strange lore. One of them was appealed to by merchants when they could not agree as to price. Money was placed in its palm and when a fair price was reached it would supposedly close its hand. The statue of the Calydonian boar was regarded with particular awe. One emperor came to believe that it was his alter ego and provided it with new sets of teeth and genitals in the belief that this would have a restorative effect on those parts of his own body.<sup>36</sup>

To medieval visitors to Constantinople these tales and superstitions were every bit as real as the physical grandeur that they saw around them. Indeed in many cases such aspects were more important, for many travellers' accounts are simply lists of the relics that they had seen and miracle stories that they had heard. Many came specifically to see the relics rather than the city itself, and others passed through as part of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Inevitably, the locals made sure that they profited from the tourist influx and money changed hands before any relics were put on view. A Russian visitor complained that:

Entering Constantinople is like entering a great forest; it is impossible to get around without a good guide, and if you attempt to get around stingily or cheaply you will not be able to see or kiss a single saint unless it happens to be the holiday of that saint ...<sup>37</sup>

The chances are that by nightfall, visitors who had entered through the Gate of Adrianople at dawn and made their way from there to the Augousteion would have visited several churches on the way and reverently kissed the relics that they were shown there on payment of the usual fee. They would also have been regaled with all kinds of stories about the monuments and statues that they passed. Even so, they had only experienced a fraction of the wonders of Constantinople. It would have taken a lifetime to see them all.

## CHAPTER 2

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# *Founding Fathers*

No visitor to Constantinople in 1200, or at any time in the Byzantine period for that matter, could have stayed there for long without hearing a great deal about two of its greatest past emperors, Constantine (306–37) and Justinian (527–65). Their magnificent tombs could be seen at the church of the Holy Apostles. Constantine's lay in the Heröon along with those of so many other deceased emperors, his magnificent sarcophagus of purple porphyry marble covered with a sumptuous cloth of gold cover. Justinian was buried in a separate building to the side, his tomb occupying the place of honour at the east end, with some lesser emperors and empresses clustered around.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the church of the Holy Apostles, the names and images of the two great emperors were everywhere. The Forum of Constantine was named for the one, while it was Justinian who was portrayed by the great equestrian statue outside Hagia Sophia in the Augousteion. Across the square, statues of Constantine and his mother frowned down from the Arch of the Milion, and mosaic portraits of Justinian and his wife Theodora gazed from the ceiling of the Brazen Gate to the Great Palace.

Why the memory of these two emperors was revered above that of all others is made manifest in a mosaic panel above the so-called 'beautiful door' in the southwest vestibule of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. It portrays them standing on either side of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child. Constantine is presenting the Virgin with a model of the city of Constantinople, Justinian with a miniature version of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. For Constantine was the founder of the city

of Constantinople, while Justinian had adorned and beautified the city by providing it with its greatest and most familiar monument. So central were these two figures to the history and ideology of the city that a host of stories and legends had grown up around them and guides were only too happy to recount these to visitors. Although those stories often represented a considerable distortion of events and of the political realities of centuries before, they tell us a great deal about how the Byzantines saw themselves and their city in 1200 and about how they used myth and legend to obscure, distort or justify contemporary reality.

Constantine, as any visitor to Constantinople in 1200 would have been told, was the son of a Roman general named Constantius Chlorus and an innkeeper's daughter called Helena. Constantius had been travelling back to Rome through Asia Minor after conducting some negotiations with the Persians in about 272 BCE and had stopped at Helena's father's inn for the night. Perceiving his important guest to be lonely and far from home, the innkeeper obligingly suggested that Constantius console himself by taking Helena to bed with him. This Constantius willingly did, only to be disconcerted in the middle of the night when a bright light shone around the room. The next day, Constantius presented Helena with an embroidered mantle, dyed in imperial purple and instructed her father to look very carefully after any child that might result from the previous night's exertions, for he had an inkling that the unusual light that had shone over the bed was an omen of future greatness. He then went on to Rome and in the fullness of time became emperor. In the meantime, Helena gave birth to his son, Constantine, but it was only when the boy was in his early teens that his father discovered his existence. Even though he was by now married with several other children, Constantius had his new-found son brought to court.<sup>2</sup>

The Byzantine version of events emphasized the fact that Constantine had been born in pagan times, when the Roman empire had still been given over to the worship of the gods of Mount Olympus. From a very young age, however, Constantine had shown a marked preference for the Christian religion even though it was then regularly being

persecuted by the pagan emperors. At the Roman court, so the story went, Constantine was in some danger because the soothsayers and priests in the imperial retinue soon had a foreboding that Constantine would one day achieve supreme power and overthrow the worship of the pagan gods. They therefore plotted to kill him. God, however, forewarned Constantine of the danger and he fled to Britain where his father Constantius was on campaign. When he arrived in the city of York, he discovered that Constantius had been taken ill and was on his deathbed. The dying emperor had by now realized the folly of paganism and had started to believe in Christ. He therefore summoned his son to his side and invested him with the emblems of the imperial office, the sceptre and the purple cloak, and named him as his successor.<sup>3</sup>

Constantine thereby became in the year 306 the first Christian Roman emperor, which was his first and foremost claim to fame. By doing so, he put the Christian Church on course for the dominance which it was later to enjoy, and as a result later generations spoke of him with awe and reverence. The description given of him by one tenth-century hagiographer is typical, blending physical with moral perfection:

The saintly Constantine was indeed a man distinguished in every way for the courage of his spirit, the keenness of his intelligence, the erudition of his discourse, the uprightness of his sense of justice, the readiness of his benevolence, the propriety of his appearance and the bravery and fortitude he showed in war; he was of great reputation among barbarians and unequalled among those of his own race, firm and unshaken in honesty. Furthermore in looks and elegance of beauty, he was both the most seemly and the most handsome, with a pleasing expression, the height of his body being of good stature, that is to say neither tall nor short; he was rather broad across the shoulders and his neck was thick, and his complexion was ruddy; the hair of his head was not bushy, and he kept his chin quite bare, and he was inclined

not to allow hair to grow on many parts of his face; his nose was hooked and his countenance was keen-eyed almost like a lion's; his hair was naturally tawny; against all his enemies, it was by prayer that he brought victory within his grasp.<sup>4</sup>

Having accounted for Constantine's accession, the story went on to describe how he soon found himself at loggerheads with other rulers of the Roman empire who were by no means as pious and benevolent. Rome had been seized by a relative of his called Maxentius, a pagan tyrant who condemned many people to death on account of their Christian faith and who regularly seduced the wives of the senators. He was also supposedly given to cutting up babies in order to use their entrails for the purposes of divination.

Hearing about this state of affairs, in the summer and autumn of 312 Constantine marched east with an army to confront Maxentius. Having crossed Gaul and marched down through northern Italy, he encamped with his troops close to the River Tiber in readiness to make an attack on Rome. The outlook was not bright. Maxentius had the bigger army and he was entrenched behind formidable fortifications. Constantine retired to his tent to ponder the next move, but at about midday he suddenly experienced a vision. Looking out at the sky he saw the noonday sun change into the shape of a cross while letters beneath it proclaimed the message 'In this, Conquer!' The emperor was puzzled as to what this might mean, but as he slept that night, Christ himself appeared to him and commanded that Constantine should make a replica of the device that he had seen in the sky and place it at the forefront of his army in the battle to come. The very next day, Constantine did as he was told, replacing the army's pagan standards with the new Christian device.

Meanwhile in Rome, Maxentius had been busily preparing for a siege. He stocked up on food supplies and ordered that all the bridges across the Tiber be cut to impede Constantine's progress. Good pagan that he was, he sought advice from the priests who guarded the Sibylline books, a collection of oracles kept in the temple of Apollo. After some deliberation the priests announced that the books indicated without a



shadow of a doubt that on 28 October Rome's greatest enemy would perish. Maxentius was delighted, for he interpreted the oracle as a clear promise of victory. He decided that rather than wait in Rome, he would march out and confront Constantine in open battle on 28 October. He took his forces to the Milvian Bridge which spanned the Tiber some way upstream from Rome. Since the stone bridge there had been cut on Maxentius's orders, a temporary pontoon replacement was constructed to allow the army to cross.

Once on the other side, battle was joined with Constantine's troops who were sporting their new Christian standards. Maxentius's army outnumbered the opposing forces by up to two to one, but it was no match for Constantine's battle-hardened soldiers. Finding that his troops were being pushed inexorably back towards the river, Maxentius ordered a retreat, no doubt hoping to revert to his original strategy of making a stand in Rome. Unfortunately, the only escape route was across the pontoon bridge and such were the numbers of panicking soldiers who had crowded onto it that it collapsed, spilling the men into the river where the rapid current swept them away. On witnessing this disaster, those left stranded on the northern side gave up the fight and surrendered. Maxentius, knowing that he could expect little mercy if taken alive, tried to reach safety by swimming across the Tiber but he too was carried away and drowned. It never seems to have occurred to him that it was he who was Rome's greatest enemy.

In the aftermath of the victory, which Christian writers could not resist comparing to Pharaoh and his army being drowned in the Red Sea, Constantine entered Rome in triumph and was baptized there by Pope Sylvester.<sup>5</sup> In the years that followed, divine favour continued to bring success and victory to the pious Constantine. He took on various other pagan usurpers who had seized power in the eastern provinces and finally, by 324, he brought the whole of the Roman empire under his own sole rule. Thus the victory of the Christian Church was ensured.

Now that peace was restored, Constantine turned to another project. He wanted to found a new city and to name it after himself. As with everything else that Constantine is supposed to have done, the hand of the Almighty guided him from the beginning. At first he planned to build

his city on the site of the ancient city of Troy. God, however, directed him in a dream to choose another spot, the city of Byzantium which lay on the Bosphorus to the north. After Constantine had inspected the site and found it well suited to his purpose, an angel appeared and obligingly helped him to sketch out the plan of the walls. On 11 May 330, the city was inaugurated in a colourful ceremony and received a new name in honour of its founder: Constantinople, the city of Constantine.<sup>6</sup>

According to the chroniclers, there were two points about the new city about which Constantine was most particular. In the first place, it was designed from the very beginning to be a Christian city. He was said to have forbidden the presence of pagan temples anywhere in the new city. Those that were there already, he demolished and replaced with churches, such as those of Hagia Sophia and the Holy Apostles.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, from the outset, Constantine was determined that his new foundation was not going to be just any city. He tried to make Constantinople look like the greatest city in the empire, Rome itself. Constantinople was given a palace, a senate house and, in the Hippodrome, an equivalent of Rome's Circus Maximus. As in Rome, there was to be a forum, the Forum of Constantine, and noble Roman families were encouraged to emigrate and settle in the new city.<sup>8</sup> In short, Constantine specifically designed Constantinople to be the new capital city of the empire, a new or second Rome.

The remaining years of Constantine's life were spent establishing Christianity throughout the empire and in combating heresy. In 325, he presided over the First Ecumenical Council held at Nicaea which formulated the definitive statement of Christian belief, the Nicene Creed. He died at Nikomedia in Asia Minor in 337 and his body was carried back to Constantinople for burial in the mausoleum of the church of the Holy Apostles. His tomb was supposed to have miraculously cured a number of sick people, a clear sign of sanctity.<sup>9</sup>

That then was the official version of the life of Constantine and the founding of Constantinople, a Christian city created by a saintly Christian prince to be the new capital city of the Roman empire. It was a version of events which, while by no means entirely fictional, was nevertheless developed largely to bolster Byzantine political

ideology. It tended to distort three aspects of the story. First it passed over the fact that Byzantium had existed for nearly a thousand years before Constantine was born and had an important history in its own right before it became Constantinople. Secondly it overplayed Constantine's Christianity as the driving force behind his actions. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it laid too much stress on the idea that the foundation of Constantinople was designed to replace Rome as the capital of the Roman empire.

Turning first to the history of Byzantium, the Byzantines of later centuries were not unaware that this city had long existed on the site but they were generally confused and uninterested in Constantinople's prehistory. Some claimed that it had been founded by a certain Byzas, others by two men, Byzas and Antes, in whose joint honour the city had been named, though this is probably no more than a fanciful play on the word Byzantium. Another tradition attributed the deed to a certain Zeuxippus.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear from ancient sources that Byzantium must have started life as long ago as the eighth or more probably the seventh century BCE, when it had been founded by a band of colonists from the Greek city of Megara, not far from Athens.<sup>11</sup> Never a major player in its own right, Byzantium had maintained a precarious independence as a city state while great empires contended for power in the region. First there had been the Persians, who captured the city in about 512 BCE. Persian rule came to an end in 478 BCE when a combined Hellenic fleet under the Spartan Pausanias had arrived on the scene. Then there had been Athens, whose maritime empire dominated the region in the fifth century BCE. The Byzantines had fallen in with what seemed to be the predominate power, but in 411, sensing the way the Peloponnesian war was going, they had switched allegiance to Sparta. They acted in much the same way when faced with the growing power of Rome. In about 150 BCE, the Byzantines wisely made a treaty with the Romans, which allowed them to retain their independent status on payment of tribute.<sup>12</sup> The decision turned out to be the right one, for the treaty gave the Byzantines many years of peace and prosperity under the *Pax Romana*. Thus although Byzantium was by no means one of the greatest

cities of the ancient world, it had nevertheless been a prosperous and successful one and its history by no means began with Constantine.

Another dubious element of the Byzantine myth was Constantine's Christianity. There is no contemporary evidence that Constantine was a Christian from his earliest youth as his later hagiographers claimed. The coins first issued by Constantine in Britain after his accession in 306 carry effigies of the gods Mars and Apollo. Moreover, the story that Constantius Chlorus bequeathed the empire to Constantine, in spite of having legitimate sons with a better claim, solely because Constantine was a Christian, is very shaky indeed and probably evolved to cover the fact that Constantine's accession was illegal. In the early years of the fourth century, the Emperor Diocletian (284–305) had introduced a system known as the Tetrarchy or rule by four. There would be two emperors, one in the western half of the empire and one in the east. Each emperor would have a junior colleague or Caesar, who would assist the senior emperor and replace him if he died. It also meant that one emperor and one Caesar could be based in the eastern and western halves of the huge empire and so be on hand to deal with crises that arose there. In 306, Constantius Chlorus was the senior emperor in the west and Galerius (305–11) was his counterpart in the east. In theory, when Constantius died he should have been replaced by his Caesar, Severus. By allowing himself to be proclaimed emperor by his father's troops in preference to Severus, Constantine was technically a usurper.<sup>13</sup>

Not until after his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312 is there any contemporary evidence for Constantine taking any interest in the Christian Church. In 314 he issued an edict of toleration which brought the persecution of Christians to an end, after which he entered into friendly correspondence with Christian bishops and began to subsidize the Church with public funds. Nevertheless, Constantine continued to hedge his bets. The legend that he received baptism from the pope in 312 is demonstrably untrue, as contemporary evidence shows that it was not until he was on his deathbed that he was finally baptized. Moreover, whatever the later legends might have said, he seems to have included at least two pagan temples in Constantinople, one dedicated to Rhea the mother of the Gods and the other

to the Fortune of Rome. Constantine is also alleged to have brought to Constantinople the tripod from the shrine of Apollo at Delphi, from which the priestess of Apollo used to pronounce oracles. Christians at the time asserted that Constantine did this to hold the tripod up to public ridicule, but it was a curious action for someone who supposedly wanted to purge his city of pagan associations.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, it was not necessarily the case that Constantine planned Constantinople as a new capital of the Roman empire to replace Rome, as the legend claimed. Those recording these events nearer the time gave other explanations for the decision. One of them, Eunapius of Sardis, claimed that Constantine had shipped people in to populate his new city in order to provide himself with a ready-made claque to applaud him on special occasions:

For Constantinople, originally called Byzantion, in distant times used to furnish the Athenians with a regular supply of corn, and an enormous quantity was imported thence. But in our times, neither the great fleet of merchant vessels from Egypt and from all Asia, nor the abundance of corn that is contributed from Syria and Phoenicia and the other nations as the payment of tribute, can suffice to satisfy the intoxicated multitude which Constantine transported to Byzantion by emptying other cities, and established near him because he loved to be applauded in the theatres by men so drunk that they could not hold their liquor.<sup>15</sup>

The fifth-century historian Zosimus asserted that Constantine acted out of guilt. Constantine had killed his own son, Crispus, because he suspected him of having slept with his stepmother, Fausta. When Fausta openly grieved over Crispus's death, Constantine decided to get rid of her too. This he accomplished by having her locked in an overheated bath until she died. Suffering pangs of guilt over this double murder, Constantine converted to Christianity, as it was the only religion that promised to absolve him of so heinous a crime. He

found, however, that it was impossible to stay in Rome where everyone viewed him reproachfully, and decided to found Constantinople as a new residence for himself. He spent vast sums beautifying his new city, but any of the buildings that he put up were so badly constructed that they soon collapsed.<sup>16</sup>

The remarks of Eunapius and Zosimus should not be taken too seriously. Both were pagans who deeply deplored the favours bestowed by Constantine on the Christian Church and who considered him and his successors to have ruined the Roman empire by abandoning the worship of the Olympian gods. Their views were clearly highly partisan and jaundiced. The later Christian tradition, on the other hand, is equally suspect, for Constantine's actions do not seem to amount to a complete replacement of Rome by Constantinople. True, he laid his new city out on a grandiose scale and provided it with a senate house and other buildings similar to those in Rome. He also built a palace there, and that would certainly suggest that he intended to raise it above the rank of other cities. He seems, however, still to have seen his foundation as second to Rome, for the senators of Constantinople were to be designated only as *clari* (distinguished) unlike those of Rome who were *clarissimi* (most distinguished).<sup>17</sup> Constantine may therefore simply have been following the example of his predecessors and seeking to solve the problem of the empire's long and vulnerable frontiers.

For some time those frontiers had been under severe strain. To the north, the Rhine and Danube frontiers were vulnerable to incursions by Germanic tribes. In the east, a resurgent Persian empire was constantly threatening to invade and attack the wealthy cities of Roman Syria. In this situation, the emperors could no longer reside permanently in Rome, as they had in previous centuries, as the capital was too far away from the threatened frontiers. Instead, by the early fourth century, they were tending to operate from Milan, Ravenna or Trier in the western half of the empire, and from Antioch or Nikomedia in the east. Constantine's new city had certain undeniable strategic advantages. It lay at one of the narrowest crossing points between Europe and Asia, where the Bosphorus was only some 500 yards across. It was an advantage that had been well appreciated in ancient times,

notably by the Persian King Darius who in the fifth century BCE had built a bridge of boats across the strait close to Byzantium, in order to convey part of his army from Asia to Europe. It also commanded the passage to the Black Sea.<sup>18</sup> Constantine may simply have wanted to have a forward base from which he could march swiftly to both the Danube and eastern frontiers, or sail along the northern coast of Asia Minor to Armenia.

Yet it does not really matter that the version of events cherished by the Byzantines of 1200 was both highly partisan and occasionally fictitious. For even if Constantine was slightly ambivalent in his adhesion to Christianity and even if he did not intend to found a new, Christian capital city, by his actions he had begun a process that was to make Constantinople the world centre that it ultimately became.

It was only in the century after Constantine's death in 337 that Constantinople became an indisputably Christian city, rose to be the seat of government of the eastern half of the Roman empire and began to take on the magnificent appearance that would characterize it ever after. As far as its Christianization went, this development ran in parallel to that of the empire in general. After Constantine, all the emperors with the exception of the short-reigned Julian (361–3) were Christians, and that inevitably encouraged conversions. As the fourth century progressed, Christianity gradually became the official religion of the empire, and by the end of the century most pagan temples had either been forcibly closed down or had fallen into decay.

As far as Constantinople was concerned, the population was overwhelmingly Christian by the mid-fourth century. One visitor complained that it was impossible to buy a loaf of bread in the market there, without the person who sold it to you giving you a lecture about the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. The Christian emperors now felt secure enough to demolish the remaining pagan temples in the city or to convert them for other purposes. At the same time, the city was becoming an important centre of ecclesiastical administration, as the Church recognized its growing political significance. The Second Ecumenical Council of the Church was held there in 381 and it was decided by the assembled prelates that henceforth the bishop of

Constantinople should 'have the primacy of honour' after the pope of Rome, because Constantinople was the New Rome. From about 450 onwards, the bishop of Constantinople bore the title of Patriarch, an honour he shared with the incumbents of only four other sees, Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Constantinople had a disadvantage when compared with these other patriarchates in that, saintly though Constantine was, his city could not claim any association with one or more of the Apostles. The Churches of Jerusalem and Antioch had been founded by St Peter, and that of Alexandria allegedly by St Mark. Rome could claim two Apostles as its founders, St Peter and St Paul. In later centuries, the Byzantines got round that in typical fashion by developing another legend. The Apostle St Andrew, it was said, had paid a visit to Byzantion and had founded its church, thus putting Constantinople on the same footing as the four other great centres of the Christian Church.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, whatever his original intentions, the years after Constantine's death saw his city rapidly turn into a capital. During the fourth century, rule of the empire was often divided between two or more emperors, as had been the case under the Tetrarchy. For example Valens (364–78) was co-emperor to his elder brother, Valentinian I (364–75), and ruled the eastern provinces. The same arrangement was reached between Arcadius (395–408) and his brother Honorius (395–423). Those who ruled in the eastern half tended to base themselves and their court permanently in Constantinople, and many of them spent their entire reigns there without feeling the need to travel to any other part of the empire.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of the emperor and court inevitably attracted settlers to the city, eager to take advantage of the opportunities for patronage and trade, and the population grew apace. From the 90,000 who may have been living there in 337, by the second half of the fourth century Constantinople probably had a population of between 200,000 and 300,000. By about 450, it may have had as many as half a million inhabitants.<sup>22</sup> The pagan Zosimus recorded this development in typically acerbic fashion:



### *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*

The size of Constantinople was increased until it was by far the greatest city, with the result that many of the succeeding emperors chose to live there and attracted an unnecessarily large population which came from all over the world – soldiers and officials, traders and other professions. Therefore they have surrounded it with new walls much more extensive than those of Constantine and allowed the buildings to be so close to each other that the inhabitants, whether at home or in the street, are crowded for room and it is dangerous to walk about because of the great number of men and beasts. And a lot of the sea round about them has been turned into land by sinking piles and building houses on them, which by themselves are enough to fill a large city.<sup>23</sup>

It was not only the presence of the emperor and the size of its population that made Constantinople seem increasingly like a capital city. The emperors who reigned there also went out of their way to make it look like one by adorning it with fine buildings. The city's cathedral of Hagia Sophia, for example, had reputedly been founded by Constantine but it was not completed and consecrated until February 360, under his son and successor, Constantius II (337–61). This first church would probably have been rectangular in shape with a long nave flanked by aisles, the traditional basilica of the later Roman empire. From an early stage it was known as 'the Great Church', indicating that it was built on a grand scale to reflect Constantinople's status. Constantine's successors continued the practice of bringing famous classical statues to the new city, denuding cities across the empire of their cherished artworks. Rome lost the bronze statue of Hercules by Lysippus which had stood on the Capitoline Hill since 209 BCE and which now ended up adorning the Hippodrome. It was presumably during this period that the Athena and Hera in the Forum of Constantine and the statues in the Hippodrome arrived in Constantinople, their purpose being to impart the prestige of antiquity which as a recent foundation it conspicuously lacked.<sup>24</sup>

The unsung hero of Constantinople's beautification was Theodosius I (379–95), often called the Great because he was the last emperor to rule over an empire that stretched from Britain to Syria. Originally from Spain, Theodosius had spent the first part of his career soldiering in the western half of the empire and he had probably never set foot in Constantinople before he arrived there as eastern emperor in November 379. Nevertheless, he recognized the importance of giving the new capital an appearance to match its political role. It was he who laid out the Forum of Theodosius, Constantinople's largest public square, between about 386 and 393, providing it with its tall column, triumphal arch and equestrian statue, and he is credited with setting up another triumphal arch which was later incorporated into the Land Walls as the Golden Gate. A pious Christian, with none of Constantine's ambivalence on religious matters, Theodosius did not neglect to provide Constantinople with a new church, that of St John the Baptist, in the suburb of Hebdomon that lay to the west, just outside the city proper.

Theodosius's most enduring monument was the Egyptian obelisk on the central spine of the Hippodrome. The obelisk had originally been commissioned by the pharaoh Thutmose III (1549–1503 BCE) to commemorate his victories in Syria and had stood for centuries at Deir el Bahri opposite Thebes. The 800-ton monument had been shipped from Egypt on the orders of the Emperor Julian, although it somehow lost about a third of its length on the journey. Theodosius had what was left brought from the southern shore of Constantinople where it had lain for some years, and placed it on a marble plinth carved with figures of himself and family watching the races from the *Kathisma*. Like Cleopatra's Needle in London and the Obelisk of Luxor in Paris, the obelisk was designed to signal that the *arriviste* capital was now of an importance to vie with the great civilizations of the past.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, whatever might have been Constantine's original intentions, by 450 Constantinople was a Christian city and, as Rome became increasingly impoverished and vulnerable, the capital city of the eastern Roman empire. Moreover, it looked the part. As one of Theodosius's courtiers, Themistius, put it:

Were Constantine to see the capital he had founded he would behold a glorious and splendid scene, not a bare and empty void; he would find it fair, not with apparent but with real beauty ... [the place] is full of carpenters, builders, decorators and artisans of every description and might fitly be called a workshop of magnificence.... Should the zeal of the emperor to adorn the city continue, a wider circuit will be demanded, and the question will arise whether the city added to Constantinople by Theodosius is not more splendid than the city that Constantine added to Byzantium.<sup>26</sup>

No doubt Themistius was exaggerating to curry favour with his imperial master, but his words clearly demonstrate that Constantine only began the process by which Constantinople became the greatest city in the Christian world.

Looking back on these developments, the Byzantines of later centuries were not unaware of the role played by the successors of Constantine, such as Theodosius I, in extending, adorning and beautifying Constantinople. Nevertheless, they singled out Justinian as deserving the credit for giving their city the monumental appearance that left visitors so awestruck, and considered that his greatest achievement was to have provided Constantinople with ‘the mighty church that was named after the Holy and Ineffable Wisdom’, the cathedral of Hagia Sophia.<sup>27</sup>

Originally from a poor peasant family in Thrace, Justinian reached the imperial office by a stroke of luck. His uncle Justin, the commander of the palace guard, had become emperor in 518, but Justin was elderly and found the challenges of his new role quite overwhelming. Part of the problem was that Justin was illiterate and had to sign official documents by using a stencil. He therefore sent for his clever nephew to assist him. When Justin died in 527, it was only natural that Justinian should step into his shoes, as he had, to all intents and purposes, been running the empire for some time already.<sup>28</sup>

The young emperor had only been on the throne a few years when he found himself faced with a sudden and terrible crisis, the so-called Nika riot. Constantinople was at that time still suffering from chronic overcrowding, and mob violence was common. It often took the form of pitched battles between the supporters of rival chariot teams that competed in the Hippodrome, the Blues and the Greens. In January 532, matters took a serious turn for the worse when, in protest against the high taxation levied by Justinian's ministers, the Blues and the Greens stopped fighting each other and joined forces to challenge imperial authority. The first sign of trouble came as the emperor took his seat in the *Kathisma* of the Hippodrome before the races. He was greeted by the Green faction not with the usual respectful acclamations but with taunts and catcalls. When an attempt was made to arrest some of the troublemakers, the two factions made a truce and stormed the prison, releasing all the prisoners they found there.

Days of street fighting followed, during which law and order broke down completely. The mob surged through the streets, shouting their watchword 'Nika!' (Victory!) and killing any government officials they could lay their hands on. Amid the confusion, fires broke out and, with no one daring to try to put them out, raged out of control. The night of 14–15 January was particularly disastrous. Flames swept across the Augousteion, engulfing the senate house, the porticoed colonnades, the Brazen Gate of the Great Palace and numerous private houses. The conflagration then reached the cathedral of Hagia Sophia on the far side of the square, which caught fire and, after blazing for some time, collapsed into a smoking ruin.

By now the crowd had decided that they needed a new emperor to replace Justinian and had chosen a nobleman called Hypatius for the purpose. Hypatius himself had no desire whatsoever to don the purple but it did not seem politic to say so in the face of so many determined would-be subjects. As for Justinian, watching developments from his vantage point in the Great Palace, things seemed to have reached the stage where flight was the only option. The emperor gave permission to his courtiers to leave the palace so that they could guard their own houses and sat down to deliberate with his counsellors on what to do next. It was at this point that Justinian's wife, Theodora, intervened

in the debate and majestically announced her determination never to leave Constantinople:

If now it is your wish to save yourself, O Emperor, there is no difficulty. For we have much money, and there is the sea, here the boats. However consider whether it will not come about after you have been saved that you would not gladly exchange that safety for death. For as for myself, I approve a certain ancient saying that royalty is a good burial shroud.

Those words marked the turning point. Justinian and his advisers ceased to contemplate flight and began to discuss ways of fighting back against the factions. The empire's ablest general, Belisarius, who had just returned with his army from the Persian wars, was ordered to bring his troops into the city to restore order. Belisarius waited until a large crowd had gathered in the Hippodrome to acclaim Hypatius as emperor. Having surrounded the place and sealed off all the exits, the soldiers burst in with drawn swords, causing the crowd to stampede in panic over the banks of seating. In the ensuing massacre some 30,000 rioters perished. As for the unfortunate Hypatius, his attempts afterwards to explain that it had all been a ghastly misunderstanding proved unavailing and he was executed.<sup>29</sup>

Normality had been restored on the streets, but the scars left by the upheaval could be seen everywhere. Large swathes of Constantinople's monumental centre lay in charred ruins, particularly the area around the Augousteion and adjoining the Great Palace. In destroying such potent symbols as the Brazen Gate of the palace and the cathedral, the Nika rioters had challenged the very basis of the emperor's authority, with its emphasis on his role as the representative of God on Earth. The damage had to be put right as quickly as possible and it is a measure of Justinian's far-sightedness that he turned the traumatic experience of the riot into an opportunity to rebuild on a grand scale. The obvious priority was to provide a replacement for the ruined cathedral of Hagia Sophia. In place of the old basilica, Justinian chose a new and revolutionary design offered by his architects Anthemius of Tralles

and Isidore of Miletus. They proposed to replace the old basilica with a square-domed structure, a radical departure from previous styles. Building went ahead at great speed, and after five years and ten months of work the cathedral was dedicated on 26 December 537. It was, from the first, hailed as a masterpiece:

For it soars to a height to match the sky, and as if surging up from amongst the other buildings, it stands on high and looks down upon the remainder of the city, adorning it, because it is a part of it, but glorying in its own beauty...<sup>30</sup>

The praise turned out to be premature. Twenty years after its completion the cathedral was severely shaken by an earthquake. One of the four arches that held up the dome was damaged, and six months later, during 558, the entire dome came crashing down. As Anthemius had since died, Isidore the younger, a nephew of Isidore of Miletus, was brought in to repair the damage and he strengthened the dome by making it narrower and slightly higher and by adding buttressing to the exterior. As a result the dome was not quite as breathtaking as it had been before, but considerably more secure.<sup>31</sup>

All these teething troubles had long since been forgotten by 1200. As the years went by and people lived with Hagia Sophia from day to day, they found it increasingly difficult to believe that such a vast and unequalled building and its soaring dome could possibly have been put up by human hands alone. So the inevitable legends grew up. Justinian and the architects must, like Constantine before them, have had divine help, the design being imparted to the emperor by an angel. When during construction there was disagreement between emperor, architects and builders over how many glazed windows there should be, again it was an angel who turned up to resolve the issue.<sup>32</sup>

On one occasion, the workmen had gone off to lunch, leaving the fourteen-year-old son of the foreman to guard the tools. As the boy obediently waited, an angel suddenly descended and asked why work had stopped. On hearing that the workforce was on its lunch break, the impatient visitor told the boy to run and fetch them. This the lad

was reluctant to do, because he had promised to guard the tools. The angel therefore made a solemn promise that he would never leave that spot until the boy returned. When the foreman and his men received this message, they at once took the boy to the emperor Justinian, who decreed that he must not return to the cathedral. That way, Hagia Sophia would have its own guardian angel for the rest of time. Guides were fond of pointing out the place, just to the left of the altar, where the angel was still supposed to be mounting his eternal vigil.<sup>33</sup>

After God and his angels, most of the credit was given by the later tradition to Justinian rather than to his architects, one ninth-century account insisting that 'Justinian alone began the church and he alone finished it, with no help from anyone else with regard to building.' Indeed, Justinian himself was supposed to have been so ecstatic when he saw the building going up that he prided himself on having excelled Solomon, builder of the Temple in Jerusalem in Old Testament times.<sup>34</sup> The feat was enough in itself to secure Justinian's reputation and placed him in the esteem of the Byzantines second only to Constantine.

It has to be said, however, that like Constantine, Justinian received mixed reviews from contemporaries as well as from those who lived in the years immediately after his death. He was certainly not the saintly figure of the pious legends. One contemporary, the historian Procopius of Caesarea, described him as:

insincere, crafty, hypocritical, dissembling his anger, double-dealing, clever, a perfect artist in acting out an opinion he pretended to hold, and even able to produce tears, not from joy or sorrow, but contriving them for the occasion according to the need of the moment ...<sup>35</sup>

Procopius was also particularly hostile to Justinian's wife and empress, Theodora, whom he portrayed as a low-born adventuress who exploited the imperial office shamelessly for her own self-aggrandisement. The most frequent charge made against Justinian and Theodora was that of greed which led them to squeeze their subjects for money using

any pretext that they could come up with. They were alleged to have accused wealthy landowners of crimes that they did not commit so that they could seize their property, or to have 'persuaded' them to hand it over as a gift. On one occasion, Justinian appointed a nobleman called Zeno to be governor of Egypt in the hope of helping himself to the absent man's property. Zeno, however, decided to take all his moveable goods with him and loaded a ship with all his gold, silver and precious stones. Not to be outsmarted, Justinian bribed some of his henchmen to unload the cargo and to drop firebrands into the hold. Zeno arrived at the harbour the next day to be told that a fire had broken out and the ship and its cargo had been lost. When Zeno died shortly afterwards, Justinian and Theodora triumphantly produced a will which named them as joint heirs, though many doubted the authenticity of the document.<sup>36</sup>

Many of these stories were probably somewhat exaggerated, but there can be no doubt that Justinian was very eager to get his hands on very large amounts of money, for the policies that he was following were extremely expensive. Not only was he spending vast sums on his building projects, including that of Hagia Sophia, but he had also embarked on the reconquest of the western half of the empire. For things had changed drastically since Constantine's day. During the early years of the fifth century, the western frontiers of the Roman empire had broken down and numerous Germanic tribes had crossed the River Rhine and begun to settle on Roman territory. The Visigoths occupied Spain, the Franks encroached into northern Gaul, the Angles and Saxons invaded Britain, the Ostrogoths took over Italy and the Vandals settled in North Africa. In 476, the last Roman emperor in the west was dethroned by a barbarian general called Odovacar. That left Constantinople as the seat of the only emperor still standing, and so 476 is as good a date as any to mark the transition from a Roman to a Byzantine empire.

Justinian was determined to reverse these events. In 534 a fleet and army sent from Constantinople under Belisarius recaptured North Africa from the Vandals. In 538 Belisarius took Sicily and then invaded Ostrogothic Italy. Another force was sent to occupy part of south-eastern Spain. The reconquest, however, proved to be rather like the



dome of Hagia Sophia: initial success was followed by the appearance of ominous cracks. The war with the Ostrogoths dragged on until 554, and while the Byzantine army was enmeshed in Italy the Persians took the opportunity to ravage the eastern province of Syria. At the same time, an outbreak of plague and a series of natural disasters ravaged the empire, depopulating some of its wealthiest provinces. When Justinian died in 565, he bequeathed to his successors an empty treasury, and borders that were becoming impossible to defend. 'Such', concluded the disgruntled Procopius, 'were the calamities which fell upon all mankind during the reign of the demon who had become incarnate in Justinian, while he himself, as having become emperor, provided the causes of them'.<sup>37</sup> While Procopius may have overstated the case, there can be no doubt that Justinian's over-ambitious policy helped to bring about the virtual collapse of the Byzantine empire in the next century when it lost its eastern provinces and Constantinople found itself under siege for the first time.

The Byzantines of 1200 had long since forgotten all the disasters of the later years of Justinian's reign. For them, the legacy of Justinian was what they could see when they walked around Constantinople. It was most obvious in the Augousteion. To the north was Justinian's cathedral of Hagia Sophia, with the statue of the emperor on horseback on the column outside. To the east was the tall, domed Brazen Gate of the Great Palace, rebuilt by Justinian after the Nika riot, its interior decorated with mosaics celebrating Justinian's victories. Some also gave him the credit for building the arch of the Milion.<sup>38</sup>

Justinian had, however, left his mark all over the city, not just in the Augousteion. He was responsible for the appearance of the church of the Holy Apostles as it was by 1200. Founded by Constantine and housing his tomb, the original church had survived the Nika riot unscathed but was starting to show signs of imminent collapse. Justinian demolished the old church and replaced it with a novel five-domed structure that was to endure for nearly a thousand years and was to be visited by generations of pilgrims as they made their way from the Land Walls to the Augousteion.<sup>39</sup> Numerous other churches benefited from Justinian's attention and were still standing in 1200, from Hagia Eirene that stood just behind Hagia Sophia to that of the

Mother of God at Blachernae. Moreover, in his decision to replace the old rectangular basilica with the square-domed design, he had started a trend. All subsequent Byzantine churches were built to this prototype so that the appearance of Constantinople in 1200, with the domes of the churches dominating the skyline, can be indirectly attributed to him.<sup>40</sup> That visible legacy was enough to enshrine Justinian as one of the greatest Byzantine emperors.

There can be no doubt, however, that, of the two, Constantine was considered the greater. As the first Christian emperor, he was regarded both as a model ruler and as a saint, his feast day being celebrated on 21 May.<sup>41</sup> His foundation of Constantinople provided the basis for Byzantine political thought and especially for the doctrine of *Translatio Imperii* or the 'transfer of empire'. The idea was that Constantine, by founding Constantinople, had irrevocably bestowed supreme authority in the Christian world on the emperors who ruled there. As one twelfth-century Byzantine put it, 'power was transferred from Rome to our country and the Queen of Cities, not to mention the senate and the whole administration'.<sup>42</sup> The doctrine was central to the way that the Byzantines perceived Constantinople as essentially the focal point of the Christian world.

Consequently, the Byzantines tended to attribute every aspect of the city to Constantine. Since, by 1200, Constantinople had the greatest collection of relics in the Christian world, it stood to reason that the founder of the city must have been the first to bring such objects there. Hence the legend grew up that when Constantine had laid out the forum that bore his name and set up a column in the centre to carry his statue, he had constructed two vaults at the base of the column. In this he placed a number of sacred objects. These vary between the different accounts, but they were said to have included the axe with which Noah made the Ark, the crosses on which the two thieves were crucified alongside Christ, the twelve baskets of leftovers from the feeding of the 5,000 and a vessel containing the myrrh with which Christ was anointed.<sup>43</sup> Hence the pride with which guides conducted visitors to Constantine's sarcophagus in later centuries and told the stories of his deeds over and over again: he had literally laid the basis for everything that the Byzantines held sacred.

## CHAPTER 3

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# *Defence*

The deeds of Constantine and Justinian were not the only ingredients in the potent myth of the Queen of Cities. Another boast that the Byzantines of 1200 were proud to make to visitors was that the city had never been taken by a foreign army and that it never would be taken until the end of the world. The ‘God-guarded city’ was yet another of Constantinople’s many epithets. It was not, however, only God himself who was seen as guarding the city. Constantinople was also regarded as enjoying the special protection of the Virgin Mary, or the *Theotokos* as she was known, among many other epithets in Greek. As one contemporary put it:

About our city you shall know: until the end she will fear no nation whatsoever, for no one will entrap or capture her, not by any means, for she has been given to the Mother of God and no one will snatch her out of Her hands. Many nations will break their horns against her walls and withdraw with shame ...<sup>1</sup>

Chroniclers recorded how the personal intervention of the Theotokos had often saved the day in times of crisis. She had sometimes been seen on the city walls participating in the defence and was even reported to have grabbed some of the attackers by the hair and thrown them to the ground.<sup>2</sup>

The inhabitants of Constantinople jealously preserved two visible tokens of the Virgin’s protection. One was her *Maphorion*, a garment

that covered the head and shoulders, which was also sometimes referred to as a veil or as a robe. It had been brought from the Holy Land in the fifth century and was housed in the church of the Virgin in Blachernae, appropriately close to the Land Walls. It was believed that the *Maphorion* had saved Constantinople from an attack by a Russian fleet in 860. The patriarch of Constantinople had brought the precious relic out of the church and had taken it up onto the Sea Walls whereupon the winds rose to scatter the enemy ships. In later years, the emperors used to take it with them when they led their armies out of Constantinople to fight on the frontiers.<sup>3</sup>

The other visible reminder of the Virgin's protection was a picture or icon. This, however, was no ordinary icon. It was popularly believed to have been painted from the life by no less a person than St Luke the Evangelist and it had supposedly been brought from Palestine to Constantinople in the fifth century. The Virgin was depicted holding Christ on her left arm, and gesturing towards him with her right. The icon therefore became known as the *Hodegetria* ('She who Shows the Way'), since the Virgin was pointing out the way of salvation.<sup>4</sup> The *Hodegetria* was usually housed in the monastery of the Hodegoi, which lay close to Hagia Sophia at the very tip of Constantinople's promontory. It was cared for by a special confraternity who organized a procession every week, when twenty men in red outfits carried the icon from its monastery to the church of the Pantokrator. On important feast days, it was processed around the cathedral of Hagia Sophia.<sup>5</sup> Whenever danger threatened, the icon was brought out from its monastery and paraded on the city walls. This had occurred as recently as 1187, when a rebel general, Alexios Branas, had laid siege to Constantinople with his army. It was always the icon that was credited with the subsequent discomfiture of the enemy, so much so that in any victory parade it was the *Hodegetria* that rode at the front in the gilded chariot while the emperor humbly followed along behind.<sup>6</sup>

Quite apart from the *Hodegetria*, Constantinople housed a number of other reportedly miraculous icons, many of which were believed to have the power to protect the city, its emperor and his armies. The church of the Virgin in Blachernae had an ancient depiction of the Mother of God that had been discovered during restoration work

in around 1030. There was also the icon of the Virgin known as the *Nikopeia* ('the Bringer of Victory'). Emperors never sallied forth on campaign without taking one or other of these icons with them, 'as a guide and guardian of all the army'.

One of them, probably the *Nikopeia*, accompanied Basil II (976–1025) when he sallied forth into Asia Minor in April 989 to do battle with the rebel Bardas Phokas. When the two armies clashed at Abydos, the emperor stood at the head of his troops with the icon clasped with his left hand and his sword in his right as the enemy charged towards them. In the ensuing mêlée the rebel leader mysteriously dropped dead from his horse, causing his soldiers to lose heart and flee. Clearly, the protectress of the Byzantine emperors had once more come to their aid, and Basil showed his gratitude by having a special silver coin minted to commemorate the victory. The obverse showed the Virgin and Child and the reverse carried the inscription: 'Glorified Mother of God, the one who trusts You does not fail'.<sup>7</sup>

Important though other icons such as the *Nikopeia* were, however, the *Hodegetria* occupied pride of place. It never seems to have been carried on campaign and remained safely within the walls of Constantinople. It was the city's pledge of security from the highest authority.

The boast about Constantinople's invulnerability was not an idle one, since the city did have an extraordinary record of survival. The Roman empire, into which it had been inaugurated in 330, had been a world of cities. One by one they had all suffered the same fate: captured or destroyed by the empire's enemies between the fifth and eighth centuries. Rome itself had been sacked by the Goths in 410 and again by the Vandals in 455: by the twelfth century it was little more than a collection of villages, huddled around the ancient ruins and Christian basilicas. Antioch in Syria had once been one of the most splendid and prosperous cities in the empire. In 540, however, the Persian king, Chosroes I (531–79), captured and largely destroyed it, and it had still not recovered when it was conquered by the Arabs in 636. Jerusalem was sacked by the Persians in 614 and finally lost to the Arabs in 638, as was Alexandria in 642. Some of the empire's outposts in the west held

out longer, but Carthage was taken by the Arabs in 697, and Ravenna by the Lombards in 751.

Of all the great cities of the ancient world, Constantinople alone avoided takeover or destruction. That was not for want of anyone willing to try. Over the centuries, a succession of powerful enemies had laid siege to Constantinople. Every time, they had been forced to retire empty-handed. While the Byzantines attributed this invulnerability to the intervention of the Virgin Mary, there were two much more down-to-earth explanations. The first was geography, the physical and material advantages of the city's position. The second was sophisticated military technology which enhanced the advantages of geography and made Constantinople impregnable.

Geography had probably dictated Constantine's choice of Byzantium as the site for his new city. It lay on the crossing point between Europe and Asia, giving relatively swift access to both the vulnerable Danube and eastern frontiers. The site had other advantages, however, when it came to defence. Since it was built on a narrow promontory, almost triangular in shape, there was a natural defence in the sea on two sides of the city. To the north, lay the Golden Horn, itself one of the finest natural harbours in the world, while the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara bordered to the east and south. A land army would therefore have to approach along the narrow and easily defended promontory.

These strategic advantages had not gone unnoticed in the past. Centuries before Constantine had been born they had been recognized in a legend about the founding of Byzantium. Back in the eighth century BCE, before setting out to colonize new lands and to found the city of Byzantium, the Greek colonists from Megara had piously paid a visit to the oracle of the god Apollo at Delphi to ask where they should found their city. As usual, the god gave an ambiguous answer, advising the colonists to choose a site 'opposite the blind'. Later these words were to become all too clear, for as they sailed north up the Bosphorus, they passed the city of Chalcedon. Across the strait, directly opposite, lay the promontory and the Golden Horn, which the Greeks who had founded Chalcedon seventeen years earlier appeared not even to have noticed. The Megarans had therefore founded Byzantium

opposite those blind Chalcedonians, taking full advantage of the sheltered anchorage and easily defensible promontory.<sup>8</sup>

It was therefore well known in ancient times that 'the site of Byzantion is, as regards the sea, more favourable to security and prosperity than that of any other city in the world'.<sup>9</sup> Yet it was only at the end of the second century CE that these advantages were seriously put to the test. When, in 192, a contest for the imperial throne broke out between the governor of Syria, Pescennius Niger, and Septimius Severus, governor of Pannonia Superior, the people of Byzantion declared for Pescennius. The contest was decided at the Battle of Issus in Asia Minor when Pescennius was defeated and killed. Severus sent his rival's head to Byzantion in the expectation that the city would now surrender to him. The Byzantines, however, defied him and held out against his armies for three years.

They were able to do this because the city was surrounded by a defensive wall with jutting towers which gave the defenders an excellent field of fire against anyone trying to attack them by land. On the seaward side, a number of harbours were built into the wall and these were closed off against attack by heavy metal chains strung across their mouths. That kept the defenders' ships, of which they had some 500, safe from attack by Severus's fleet and provided a base from which they could sally forth to attack the enemy by sea. Consequently, supplies could still be brought in. Indeed some merchant ships used to sail past Byzantion deliberately, in the hope that the Byzantine ships would come out and 'capture' them. Once inside the Golden Horn, the merchants would then sell their wares at a high price and depart.

Quite apart from the narrow promontory and the excellent harbour, there was another geographical feature that played a part in the city's defence against Severus. The prevailing tide worked to its advantage. The current in the southern Bosphorus is very strong as the flow of water pushes down from the Black Sea towards the Sea of Marmara. It runs along the eastern shore at three to four knots, or more when the wind is strong, creating eddies and counter-currents in the inlets and bays. One such counter-current eddies into the Golden Horn at a speed of about half a knot, helping Byzantine ships to reach the safety of their harbours, but tending to force enemy ships onto

the rocky outcrops below the city walls. As the contemporary Greek historian Cassius Dio (c. 164–c. 229) put it:

The Bosphorus is of the greatest advantage to the inhabitants; for it is absolutely inevitable that, once anyone gets into its current, he will be cast up on the land in spite of himself. This is a condition most satisfactory to friends, but most embarrassing to enemies.<sup>10</sup>

The Byzantines could not hold out indefinitely, however, and as food became increasingly scarce much of the population boarded the ships and attempted to sail away. Severus's ships easily intercepted the overladen Byzantine vessels and sank most of them. The sight of hundreds of corpses floating past was too much for the remaining defenders and in 196 they finally capitulated. Not surprisingly, the now Emperor Septimius Severus (193–211) was in a vengeful mood. He punished the renegade city with the demolition of its defensive walls and the loss of its independent status, handing it over to the citizens of nearby Perinthos.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of Byzantium's final defeat, the lessons of its long defiance did not go unlearned. Cassius Dio, who saw the ruins of the city walls after they had been demolished, was of the opinion that Severus had been most unwise in pulling them down since in doing so he had destroyed 'a strong Roman outpost and a base of operations against the barbarians from Pontus and Asia'.<sup>12</sup> Severus himself does seem to have realized Byzantium's potential. Towards the end of his reign, he relented and rebuilt the city on a larger scale, providing it with extensive public baths and even reconstructing its walls. Under Severus's son and successor, Caracalla (211–17), the city's independence was restored.<sup>13</sup> It was much too valuable a site to waste.

The new city of Constantinople possessed all the defensive advantages conferred by nature on the old Byzantium. Its rulers, however, were to utilize the best military technology of their day to turn an easily defended site into an impregnable one. The first step was to provide the city with a new wall which would defend it on the landward side.



When Constantine the Great founded his new city, he constructed a set of walls across the middle of the promontory, enclosing a much wider tract of land in which to expand the built-up area. These proved to be the city's salvation following the catastrophic Roman defeat by the Goths at the Battle of Adrianople in 378. The victorious Goths at once headed for Constantinople since there were no Roman armies to bar their way. When they got there, one look at the strength of the fortifications persuaded them to give up any attempt to capture the place and they withdrew.<sup>14</sup>

By 400 AD, however, the security offered by Constantine's walls was less reassuring. The population had grown to such an extent that much new development had had to go on outside the defences, leaving these areas vulnerable to attack. Early in the reign of Theodosius II (408–50), news arrived of the fate of Rome at the hands of the Goths. It was clear that something would have to be done at once if Constantinople was not to go the same way. Since the emperor was still a minor, in 413 the regent for the young ruler, Anthemius, gave the order for the construction of a new set of walls further west than those of Constantine and covering more than seven kilometres or four miles distance from the top of the Golden Horn to the Sea of Marmara.

These Theodosian or Land Walls were to constitute the main defence of Constantinople for the next thousand years. Constructed of limestone blocks, divided at intervals by layers of bricks, the original or inner wall stood about twelve metres high and was about five and a half metres thick. It was punctuated at intervals by ninety-six towers, providing broad platforms for ballistae and catapults. In front of the wall was a wide, brick-lined ditch, between fifteen and twenty metres across and between five and seven metres deep with a stockade made of brick and wood on the city side. In 447 the defences were made even stronger by the addition of a new wall, between the ditch and the main wall. This outer wall was slightly lower than the inner wall and punctuated by a further ninety-two towers.

Taken together, the inner and outer walls and the ditch provided a three-tier defence that was impossible to penetrate. Any assailant would have first to cross the ditch and stockade while exposed to withering fire from the outer and inner walls. Even if they did get across and

managed to capture the outer wall, they would find themselves trapped in the five-metre wide corridor between it and the inner wall.<sup>15</sup>

The fortifications continued along the seaward sides of Constantinople, linking up with the Land Walls, to deter assault by sea. These Sea Walls were not as formidable as their land counterparts but for much of their length they did not need to be because the prevailing current made it impossible for ships to be brought close enough inshore to mount an assault on them. The only area of Constantinople's coast where ships could land was the stretch along the Golden Horn. Any possibility that enemy ships might try to take advantage of that by sailing into the Horn was closed off in times of crisis by a heavy iron chain, 300 metres long, which was strung from a tower within the city, known as the Kentenarion, to another, the Kastellion, in the suburb of Galata on the other side of the water. Wooden floats placed along the length of the chain kept it at the surface of the water, thereby preventing hostile vessels from entering.<sup>16</sup> Thus by the time Justinian became emperor in 527, the defences had been revolutionized and Constantinople had been enclosed in an iron ring.

It was not long before those defences were put to the test, for from the late sixth century on, the Byzantine empire entered a period of crisis. Justinian's effort to reconquer the western provinces had left the empire financially exhausted and vulnerable to attacks on its borders. Within a few years of the great emperor's death, most of Italy was lost to the Lombards, and his successors had to fight an increasingly desperate battle to hold the line elsewhere. Matters came to a head in 602 when the overthrow and assassination of the Emperor Maurice (582–602) signalled a period of internal civil strife of which the empire's enemies quickly took advantage. The Slavs and Avars crossed the Danube and occupied most of the Balkans as far south as the Peloponnese, while in the east the Persians overran Syria, Palestine and Egypt. The empire recovered under the leadership of Heraclius (610–41) and drove the Persians out of the eastern provinces during the 620s. The territory recovered, however, was soon lost again to the Arabs who invaded the empire in 634.

In this situation, it was only a matter of time before Constantinople itself came under threat. The test came in the year 626 when the

empire's eastern and western enemies united in an attempt to take its capital. In July of that year, taking advantage of the absence of the Emperor Heraclius on campaign in Armenia, the Persian general, Shahrvaraz, brought his army across Asia Minor and encamped at Chalcedon, opposite Constantinople. Meanwhile, in the Balkans, the Avars and their Slav allies marched south through Thrace to the Land Walls which they bombarded with siege engines.

The Land Walls held firm, however, while geography also put the Persians and Avars at a disadvantage. Their armies were separated by the waters of the Bosphorus, making it difficult for them to link up and concert their efforts, for neither possessed a fleet of ships. In desperation, the Avars tried to bridge the gap by launching small boats manned by Slav crews to bring the Persians across to the European side of the Bosphorus. The attempt proved to be a disaster. The prevailing tide tended to drive the boats back to the European shore and those that did make it to mid-channel could easily be intercepted by Byzantine warships. With the link between them cut, the two armies were powerless and broke off the siege.<sup>17</sup>

In the later seventh century, a new enemy appeared before the walls of Constantinople. The Arabs had successfully conquered the empire's eastern provinces, and the Umayyad Caliph, Mu'awiyah I (661–80), was now determined to seize the ultimate prize. In the spring of 674, a large Arab fleet sailed through the Dardanelles, ravaged the coast of Thrace and captured Cyzicus to use as a forward base. There the fleet was joined by a land army under Mu'awiyah's son, Yazid. Unlike in 626, therefore, Constantinople was now threatened by both an army and a fleet.

This time it was technology that saved the city. After enduring the Arab attacks for several years, in 678 the Byzantines counter-attacked by sea. Their ships were equipped with a secret weapon, known as 'Greek fire', the invention of a Syrian architect called Kallinikos and the nearest thing that the Middle Ages had to napalm. It was concocted from a mixture of ingredients which probably included sulphur, pitch and quicklime. It may even have contained some crude oil, specially imported across the Black Sea from Armenia and the Caucasus where surface deposits were still to be found. Whatever its exact composition,

Greek fire was a highly inflammable liquid which, when heated in an airtight bronze container, could be shot onto an enemy ship from a siphon fixed to the prow of the attacking vessel. The liquid was ignited as it emerged from the siphon and once alight would defy all efforts to put it out. It would even burn on the sea and was quite capable of reducing an opposing warship to a blazing wreck in minutes.

It cannot have been an easy task to manoeuvre close enough to score a direct hit, and misses were frequent. That did not really matter, however, for quite apart from the physical damage that it could cause, Greek fire was a demoralizing psychological weapon. It burst from the siphon with a noise like thunder, and was often fired from bronze figureheads in the shape of lions and dragons to heighten the terror that it instilled in the crews of enemy vessels. After one brush with Byzantine vessels armed with Greek fire, enemy ships were likely to make off at the very sight of the dragons' heads, saving the Byzantines from the need to use up precious fuel.<sup>18</sup>

This terrifying weapon, combined with the evident impossibility of breaching the Sea Walls, persuaded the Arabs to withdraw in 678, to the delight of the Byzantines who had enjoyed little success against them thus far. A poet celebrated the victory in verse, asking:

Where now, O Cursed Ones, are your shining bright  
ranks of arrows; where now the melodious chords of  
bow strings? Where is the glitter of your swords and  
spears, your breastplates and head-borne helmets,  
scimitars and darkened shields ...? And where are the  
ships that were raised on high as if such things were  
unlucky cedar coffins from Lebanon?<sup>19</sup>

The rejoicing was premature, however, for the Arabs were to return and to mount what was perhaps the severest siege yet. In the summer of 717, a powerful army under the command of Maslamah, the brother of the Umayyad Caliph, marched across Asia Minor to link up with a fleet that had sailed up the Aegean and into the Sea of Marmara. With the fleet to protect his crossing, Maslamah was able to take his troops across the Dardanelles to the European side and march

them across Thrace to the Land Walls. There he constructed a series of earthworks parallel to the walls to prevent any help getting through while his fleet set up a blockade by sea. The Arabs clearly hoped to starve Constantinople into submission since there was no hope of breaching the walls.

Before long, however, nature came to the Byzantines' aid. On 1 September, as the Arab fleet moved up to supply the army at the Land Walls, it found itself becalmed in the middle of the current and then slowly blown backwards by the prevailing southerly wind. Seeing their chance, the Byzantine fleet bore down on them. Some twenty Arab vessels were set alight with Greek fire, some running aground under the Sea Walls, some sinking and some being blown burning across the Sea of Marmara. The defeat of the Arab fleet had serious repercussions for the army besieging the Land Walls. On the one hand, it seriously reduced the effectiveness of the blockade and allowed the Byzantines to bring in supplies by sea and to continue to fish in the waters around Constantinople. The Arabs, on the other hand, having destroyed most of the crops of Thrace so as to deny them to the Byzantines, found themselves running short of food as the severe winter of 717–18 set in. Before long they were reduced to eating roots, leaves and even the camels that they had brought with them as beasts of burden. Although Arab reinforcements arrived the following spring, it was by then fast becoming clear that blockade was even less likely to take Constantinople than a direct assault. The siege was lifted on 15 August 718 and the Arabs never returned.<sup>20</sup>

These spectacular victories ensured that Constantinople's reputation for impregnability was established. Nevertheless, the seventh and eighth centuries were a period of severe crisis for the city. The needs of defence took priority over everything else and the building activity that had characterized previous centuries came to a complete halt. The population shrank drastically as repeated outbreaks of plague decimated its inhabitants. During the summer of 745, according to one chronicler, the plague:

flared up all at once so that entire households were completely shut up and there was no one to bury the

dead. Because of extreme necessity, a way was devised of placing planks upon animals saddled with four panniers each and so removing the dead or piling them likewise one upon the other in carts. When all the urban and suburban cemeteries had been filled, as well as empty cisterns and ditches, and many vineyards had been dug up and even the orchards within the old walls to make room for the burial of human bodies, only then was the need satisfied.<sup>21</sup>

This was Constantinople's dark age, when it ceased to be the capital of a mighty empire and became instead an embattled fortress, fending off enemies from its very walls. After about 750, however, the empire began to recover and the Byzantines' military fortunes revived. They slowly reconquered the Balkans from the Slavs and halted the Arab advance in the east. In later centuries, the Byzantines were able to go onto the offensive, so that by 1050 the empire incorporated Asia Minor, part of Armenia, Greece and the Balkans south of the Danube, the Aegean and Ionian islands, Cyprus and Crete.

Consequently, Constantinople was no longer threatened as directly as it had been in the seventh and eighth centuries and its population started to recover, reaching about 375,000 by 1050.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, there were still attempts to take the city. The Bulgars, on whom the Byzantines waged war on and off throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, mounted several sieges, but, lacking a fleet, there was never a realistic possibility of their succeeding where the Arabs had failed. In 813, their khan, Krum (c. 803–14), who had just wiped out an entire Byzantine army along with the emperor, brought his army before the Land Walls. Having got there, he found that there was very little that he could do. So having burned those buildings, villas and palaces that he found outside the walls, Krum rode up and down from the Golden Gate to Blachernae to 'exhibit his forces' and then sued for peace.<sup>23</sup>

Another threat came from the Russians who sailed across the Black Sea against Constantinople on a number of occasions. In 941, their numerically superior fleet was worsted by just fifteen Byzantine vessels armed with Greek fire. Many of the Russian ships were set alight,

although most of the casualties resulted when the panic-stricken mariners jumped into the sea and drowned in their heavy armour. The survivors returned with the excuse that the Byzantines 'had in their possession the lightning from heaven, and had set them on fire by pouring it forth, so that the Russians could not conquer them'.<sup>24</sup> By then it must have been clear that there was little hope of capturing Constantinople and those who wanted to make war on the Byzantine emperor generally attacked his outlying provinces or made a show of force before Constantinople to extort concessions.

By 1200, therefore, it had been many years since Constantinople had experienced any direct attack by an external enemy. It had become much more common for the city to be besieged by Byzantine armies led by a general who hoped to usurp the throne from the reigning emperor. This type of warfare was very different from the great sieges of the past. Pitched fighting was seldom entered into and casualties were kept to a minimum, as most of the inhabitants of Constantinople remained neutral and awaited the outcome. What the usurper was hoping for was either to exploit the known weak points in the Land Walls or to persuade someone on the inside to help him to gain entry to the city. The greatest difference of all was that, unlike those mounted by the Arabs, Bulgars and Russians in the past, these attacks sometimes succeeded.

For the impregnable Land Walls did have a few vulnerable points that could be made use of by those in the know. One was the pipes and aqueducts which crossed them to bring in the city's water supply. In emergencies they were generally cut by the defenders and the city could survive on water stored in cisterns, but they still provided a possible bridge over the defences if an attacker had the element of surprise. In the summer of 705, the deposed emperor Justinian II staged a dramatic political comeback when he crept into Constantinople with a band of picked men through the Aqueduct of Valens, causing his rival, Tiberius III Apsimar (698–705), to panic and flee.<sup>25</sup>

Another weakness was to be found at the northern extremity of the Land Walls, as they approached the Golden Horn and linked up with the Sea Walls. The suburb of Blachernae had been left outside the

original construction probably because it was of minimal importance in the fifth century. By the seventh century, however, more buildings had been erected there and Blachernae was also home to the *Maphorion* which was housed in the church of the Theotokos there. Following the Avar–Persian siege of 626, therefore, the Land Walls were extended outwards to enclose the Blachernae area, creating a bulge in their otherwise fairly straight line. It was within this outcrop that an important imperial residence was later built, the Palace of Blachernae. It did mean, however, that this area of wall was vulnerable to bombardment from catapults as it protruded out beyond the line of the rest of the Land Walls. Moreover, this section of the wall was only one tier deep, lacking the outer wall and moat which were difficult to construct on the sloping terrain. During the twelfth century, the Blachernae section was completely rebuilt and strengthened. It was made thicker than the existing Theodosian Walls, using larger blocks of stone, and its towers were placed closer together. That went some way towards reducing the danger but the Blachernae section remained a vulnerable point.<sup>26</sup>

While something could be done to counter the danger posed by the aqueducts and the Blachernae ‘bulge’, there was little that the emperors could do about the so-called *Mesoteichion*. Meaning literally the ‘middle of the walls’, this was the section of the Land Walls between the Gate of St Romanos and the Gate of Adrianople where the defences had to follow the lie of the land and dip down into the valley of the River Lykos. Consequently it was impossible to construct a deep moat there as the water would drain away while attackers could position themselves on the higher ground further back and use the advantage of height to intimidate the defenders by hurling missiles over the walls. Would-be usurpers knew this point well and always drew up their armies before the Gate of Adrianople to take advantage of the lie of the land.<sup>27</sup>

This was what happened in 1047, when Leo Tornikes led an army to the Land Walls in the hope of unseating the Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–55). The emperor had recently suffered a bout of illness, and rumours were circulating that he had died, so he judged it prudent to go in person to the Land Walls to encourage the troops that were facing Tornikes’s army, taking a seat on the battlements where he



was in full view. Unfortunately, he could also be seen by the rebel army, and a mounted archer took the opportunity to loose off an arrow in his direction. Had it struck home, Tornikes would probably have found himself emperor, but Constantine happened to move his head to one side at the last moment. The arrow whistled past his ear and hit one of his young courtiers, who was standing behind, in the ribs.<sup>28</sup>

The weaknesses in the defences, however, seldom delivered victory to a rebel army, and the most likely way for it to take Constantinople was for a sympathizer on the inside to open one of the gates. Tornikes and his followers were clearly relying on this happening in 1047. Rather than make any attempt to assault the walls, they energetically harangued the soldiers on the Land Walls, deriding Constantine IX and his well-known self-indulgent lifestyle and urging the merits of Tornikes. They even staged some comic dances, full of ribald jokes at the emperor's expense. Then they led their prisoners in front of the walls and threatened to put them to death if the gates were not opened. It was all to no avail. The gates remained firmly shut and the defenders unleashed a volley of stones from their catapults, though these all fell short of their targets. Faced with such intransigence, the rebel army eventually gave up and withdrew.<sup>29</sup>

That was not always how things worked out. A similar situation occurred in the summer of 1057 when Isaac Komnenos revolted against Michael VI (1056–7). Isaac was based in Asia Minor and so he led his army towards the Bosphorus. His forces easily saw off an army sent against them by Michael VI, but the strait was as formidable a barrier as the Land Walls and Isaac could not cross it as long as the emperor in Constantinople controlled the fleet. Komnenos's army therefore encamped near Nicaea and waited on events. Michael decided to negotiate and sent an embassy to Komnenos's camp offering to adopt him as his heir so that he would succeed as emperor after Michael's death. Komnenos accepted this compromise, but, before it could be carried into effect, news arrived that a popular revolt against Michael had broken out in Constantinople and Komnenos was being invited to sail across and enter the city. Thus on 1 September 1057 he entered Constantinople, effectively having captured the capital without the need for a siege, and mounted the throne as Isaac I (1057–9).<sup>30</sup>

Popular support was only one of the ways to get the gates opened from the inside. Another was to secure the loyalty of the troops guarding a key section of the Land Walls. By 1200 and for a long time before, the bulk of the empire's armed forces were composed of foreign mercenaries, largely from Russia, Scandinavia, Germany, France and England, although African palace guards are also reported.<sup>31</sup> These imported troops included the famous Varangian guard who formed the emperor's personal bodyguard and who were distinguished by the heavy double-edged swords which they carried on their shoulders on ceremonial occasions. Some were exiles from political reverses at home, such as the English Varangians in the service of Alexios I in the later eleventh century who had been forced to leave their homeland by the Norman Conquest of 1066. The Varangians had a reputation for unshakable loyalty to the reigning emperor, a valuable commodity in the murky world of Byzantine politics, which was why they were preferred over native troops. Indeed, most contemporary Byzantines were quite happy to admit that the Varangians and other mercenaries were by far the most faithful and courageous soldiers that the empire had.<sup>32</sup>

One of the most famous Varangians was Harold Sigurtharson or Hardrada. After leaving his native Norway in 1030 following the battle of Sticklestad when his brother, King Olaf Haroldson had been killed, Harold had wandered for some time in Russia, before heading for Constantinople and enrolling with his followers in the Varangian guard. His duties there were not restricted to staying in the palace and guarding the imperial person. Harold took part in Byzantine campaigns in the Aegean, in Bulgaria and in Sicily, during which he acquitted himself more than creditably. In recognition of his martial prowess, he was made leader of the Varangian guard and invested by the emperor with the sonorous title of *Spatharokandidatos*. By the time he left Constantinople in around 1044, he was a rich man from his accumulated salary, imperial gifts and the plunder from the campaigns. Back in his native Norway, Harold succeeded in becoming king, and his twenty years of iron-handed rule earned him the sobriquet of 'Hardrada' or 'the Stern'. He had not, however, lost his taste for overseas adventure. In September 1066, he launched an invasion of England, but on this

occasion his military acumen seems to have deserted him. His army was routed and he himself was killed at the battle of Stamford Bridge. As far as the Byzantines were concerned, however, Harold had been an asset who had been worth every bit of the largesse lavished on him by the emperor.<sup>33</sup>

Not all the mercenaries were of the calibre of Harold Hardrada and the Varangians, of course, and would-be usurpers were able to take advantage of that. In the spring of 1081, a young general called Alexios Komnenos, nephew of Isaac, brought his army to the Land Walls to challenge Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates (1078–81). The rebels were greeted with the usual whistles and catcalls from the defenders, and to start with there seemed to be no likelihood of a repeat of the popular rising that had given ingress to Alexios's uncle in 1056. The wait therefore began. Inevitably the besieged and the besiegers began to exchange conversation and Alexios thereby discovered which regiments were stationed on which towers along the Land Walls. These included the Varangians and the Immortals, the latter being composed entirely of Byzantine soldiers. Alexios was advised not to try to negotiate with them as they were likely to remain loyal to Nikephoros. Further along, however, was a tower guarded by the Nemitzi, a regiment of foreign, presumably German, mercenaries, and Alexios decided to make contact with them. A man was sent as close as possible to the wall, and the commander of the Nemitzi leant over the battlements to parley. Presumably some kind of financial deal was struck, with Alexios agreeing to better the salary paid by his rival, and it was agreed that the Gate of Adrianople would be opened at a prearranged time. At dawn on 1 April, Komnenos's troops poured into Constantinople, enabling him to ascend the throne as Alexios I (1081–1118) and to place the Komnenian dynasty in power for over a century.<sup>34</sup>

There were, therefore, certain flaws in the stories told by the Byzantines of 1200 about the invulnerability of their God-guarded city. Geography and technology could be given the credit just as well as divine intervention, and, far from being impregnable, the city had in fact been captured on numerous occasions, albeit by usurping generals rather than by a foreign power.

Yet the Byzantines were not blind. They were well aware of the advantages that geography and technology gave them. As recently as 1185, the action of the prevailing current in the Bosphorus had been graphically demonstrated. Faced with a popular uprising and a rival candidate for the throne, Emperor Andronicus I had attempted to flee north by ship. In spite of desperate efforts by the crew, the current drove his boat back to the shore, where his executioners were waiting for him.<sup>35</sup> The Byzantines also knew the value of their military technology and especially of the Land and Sea Walls. Their first reaction in any crisis, when was in the offing, was to inspect and repair these fortifications, and to demolish any houses that had been built illegally alongside them. Any earthquake damage was quickly made good, whether there was an immediate threat or not.<sup>36</sup> As for Greek fire, it was an article of faith among the Byzantine ruling classes that the secret was never to be divulged to an outside power.<sup>37</sup>

It was not therefore that the Byzantines denied their material advantages but rather that they saw them as further evidence of divine favour. The walls could be extended and repaired but ultimate security lay in God. Hence the inscription on one of the towers of the Land Walls imploring Christ to 'preserve thy city undisturbed'. When the unpredictable winds of the Bosphorus had died down and becalmed the Russian fleet in 941, that was God lulling the breeze and calming the waves.<sup>38</sup> Technology was a gift from God, often transmitted, like so much else, through the founder of the city, Constantine the Great. Greek fire, for example, which had originally been brought to Constantinople by a Syrian refugee in the 670s, was later said to have been revealed to Constantine by an angel and passed down from him to succeeding generations of emperors. It was even said that the use of English mercenaries was something instituted by Constantine. After he had been crowned emperor at York in 306, he allegedly brought 30,000 Britons east with him and they constituted the first inhabitants of his new capital.<sup>39</sup> Even the frequent capture of Constantinople by rebel generals could be subtly twisted to suit the myth. After all, if the usurper succeeded, it was clear that he had had the favour of God in overthrowing a wicked tyrant. If he failed, then it was equally

obvious that the Theotokos had once more stepped in to protect the God-guarded city.

It would be wrong, however, to believe that this way of seeing things was the result of cynical calculation. On the contrary, there is every indication that the Byzantines genuinely believed that they were the beneficiaries of special divine protection. So important was that idea that it was even built into imperial protocol. It was laid down that when an emperor set out across the Bosphorus by ship to campaign in Asia Minor, he was to leave his capital in God's care:

When the emperor is a sufficient distance from the imperial harbour, so that he can look upon the city, he rises from his couch and stands looking eastwards with his hands raised to heaven; and making the sign of the cross three times with his hand over the city, he prays to God and says: 'Lord Jesus Christ, my God, I place in Your hands this Your city.'<sup>40</sup>

In this way, military power was given the ultimate justification of divine sanction.

## CHAPTER 4

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### *Palaces and Power*

The internal politics of the Byzantine empire have long since acquired an unsavoury reputation. ‘The most profligate debaucheries’, wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), ‘the most abandoned villainies, the most atrocious crimes, plots, murders and assassinations form the warp and woof of the history of Constantinople’.<sup>1</sup> It has to be said that the charge is not without substance. Of the seventy or so emperors who reigned in Constantinople between 330 and 1204, less than half died in their beds at a ripe old age, still in office, and passed the crown to a son or designated successor. Violent changes of ruler litter the pages of Byzantine history, emperors frequently being overthrown by those closest to them. Michael II (820–9) reached the throne by murdering his old comrade-in-arms, Leo V (813–20), who was stabbed to death while praying in church and his body dumped in a cesspit. John I Tzimiskes (969–76) became emperor by sneaking into the bedroom of his uncle, Nikephoros II Phokas (963–9), with a gang of followers who then hacked Nikephoros to pieces with their swords. The emperor’s wife, Theophano, was one of the conspirators and had seen to it beforehand that the door of the chamber would be unlocked. When attempts on the throne such as this went wrong, on the other hand, the losers could expect little mercy. When the rebel Bardas Phokas died in the battle of Abydos in 989, his head was paraded on a spear through the streets of Constantinople. One of his associates who was taken alive was put to death by impalement.<sup>2</sup>

Deposed emperors or unsuccessful would-be usurpers were not always murdered. Some got away with being forcibly tonsured and made to take monastic vows. They were then immured for the rest of their lives behind the high walls of a monastery. What has made Byzantine politics truly notorious, however, is the regularity with which the losers in the endless round of plots and coups were subjected to a fate which might be considered even worse than death, that of being blinded by having their eyes gouged out with red hot irons. It was a brutal business. The blinding of Romanos IV Diogenes (1068–71), who was ousted by his stepson, Michael Doukas in 1071, was carried out so ineptly by his captors that he died not long afterwards. Most shocking of all, Constantine VI (780–97) was blinded and deposed on the orders of his own mother, Eirene.<sup>3</sup>

Such mutilation was regarded as justified because it provided a ‘humane’ alternative to killing the victim. Nevertheless, the Byzantines were well aware of what a fearsome punishment it was, and there were examples of individuals being spared at the last moment, merely having their eyelids singed as a warning. In general, however, no emperor could afford such leniency and the deed was usually carried out without mercy. After all, in general it seems to have worked. Mutilation of any kind was deemed to be a disqualification for imperial office and so, in the past, political failures had had their noses split open. Then, in 705, the deposed emperor Justinian II, whose nose had been given the standard treatment, managed to seize back the throne and to reign for a further seven years in spite of this very visible mutilation, earning the sobriquet of *Rhinotmetos* or ‘the noseless’. Consequently, blinding became more common as it had the added advantage of physically incapacitating that victim and so ensured that they caused no more trouble. Nikephoros Diogenes, who was blinded in 1094 for plotting against the reigning emperor, retired from Constantinople to his estates and passed his remaining years in the study of classical literature, using secretaries to read the texts to him. Not until 1203 did a blinded former emperor, Isaac II, succeed in regaining the throne.<sup>4</sup>

In view of this long record of plot, counter-plot and mutilation, it is hardly surprising then that the very word ‘Byzantine’ has acquired in English the pejorative meaning of ‘underhand’ and ‘devious’. That

is not entirely fair, since many other societies have displayed a similar propensity for frequent bouts of assassination and intrigue. What was unique to Byzantium was, as always, the way in which theory covered reality. Just as the foundation and survival of Constantinople had been overlaid with myths and pious legends, so had the acquisition and exercise of political power. In spite of the unedifying way in which most Byzantine emperors had reached their position, the office that they held remained imbued with a mystic, sacred aura, with its incumbent regarded as being nothing less than a kind of deputy to Almighty God.

Byzantine political theory had largely been developed and articulated by one man, a certain Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c. 260–339), a contemporary of Constantine the Great. Eusebius did not know Constantine well and probably only met him two or three times. It is unlikely that Constantine himself even remembered who he was. Nevertheless the good bishop seems to have appointed himself to the task of presenting Constantine as the ideal Christian ruler, a novel undertaking as no Roman emperor of the past had been a Christian. In a speech written in honour of the thirtieth anniversary of Constantine's accession in 336, Eusebius argued that a Christian emperor did not just accede to the throne, but was appointed there by God. He was a sort of lesser image of the Almighty, governing on Earth while God ruled in Heaven:

The sovereign dear to God, in imitation of the Higher Power, directs the helm and sets straight all things on earth ... Thus outfitted in the likeness of the kingdom of heaven, he pilots affairs below with an upward gaze, to steer by the archetypal form.<sup>5</sup>

Whether Eusebius's motive in this was to ingratiate himself with Constantine or to attach the somewhat ambivalent emperor more closely to the camp of the Christians is impossible to tell, but there can be no doubt that he set the pattern of Byzantine political thought for the rest of the empire's existence. The idea that the emperor was God's representative



or vicegerent on earth stuck and was repeated by generations of court orators ever afterwards.

It is important to remember, however, that the idea of 'imitation' or *mimesis* of God could, in the opinion of the Byzantines, only be applied to the emperor in Constantinople. No other worldly ruler, be he ever so powerful in worldly terms, could claim to have such a close relationship with the deity. The Byzantine emperors were different because they were, according to their official title, 'Emperor and Autocrat of the Romans'. The subjects they ruled over were the Romans, the name 'Byzantines' that is now given to them being a modern invention to distinguish them from the ancient Romans. The basis of this claim was the doctrine of *Translatio Imperii*, the idea that Constantine had transferred the seat of the Roman empire from Rome to Constantinople.

The Byzantines took the Roman claim extremely seriously. Some envoys who arrived in Constantinople in August 968 bearing a letter addressed to the 'emperor of the Greeks' were thrown into prison for their 'sinful audacity'.<sup>6</sup> It is again Eusebius who makes it clear why it was so important for the Byzantine emperors to be called Roman. The first Roman emperor was Augustus (31 BCE–14 CE) who, Eusebius pointed out, had reigned at the same time that Jesus Christ had been born into the world.<sup>7</sup> Clearly God had united much of the known world under one ruler with a purpose and when Constantine became a Christian that purpose had become plain. God desired all Christians to be ruled by one pious Christian ruler, the Roman emperor.<sup>8</sup>

By 1200, of course, the authority of the Roman emperor in Constantinople had shrunk considerably from what it had been in Constantine's day, and only a very small part of the Christian world was under his rule. That made no difference to the theory. As late as 1398, when the emperor ruled little more than his capital city, the patriarch of Constantinople wrote that:

The emperor has still to this day the same appointment and support from the Church; he has the same position and prayers: he is anointed with the solemn myrrh, and appointed emperor and autocrat of the

Romans – to wit of all Christians ... No other rulers or governors of provinces have such a position.<sup>9</sup>

No visitor to Constantinople in 1200 could have gone far without encountering that theory in visible form. In churches and public spaces the imperial image was everywhere, whether carved in stone, founded in bronze or depicted in paint or mosaic. The successors of Constantine were often portrayed standing next to Christ or the Virgin Mary who were placing their hands upon their crowned heads in token of blessing and as an indication of the origin of the imperial power. All emperors and empresses, not only the sainted Constantine and his equally saintly mother, Helena, were shown with halos. That did not necessarily denote personal holiness but that of the office they held. To make the matter absolutely clear, such portraits were often accompanied by an inscription naming the emperor and describing him as ‘faithful in Christ emperor and autocrat of the Romans’.<sup>10</sup>

It was only right that the holder of so august a position should be housed in such a way as to reflect his status. By 1200 the Byzantine emperor had not one magnificent palace in Constantinople, but two. These were the Great Palace (sometimes known as Boukoleon) and the Palace of Blachernae. The Great Palace was the older and more extensive of the two, situated next to the Hippodrome and Hagia Sophia in the heart of the city, where Constantine the Great had built his first residence. Justinian had rebuilt its main entrance, the Brazen Gate, and remodelled much of the interior.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent emperors had added new buildings and demolished others.<sup>12</sup> By 1200, therefore, the Great Palace was not so much a palace as a complex that sprawled over an extensive site of some five square kilometres. Consequently, it is rather difficult to envisage what the ground plan of the Great Palace would have been like at any one time.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, there are descriptions of some of the individual buildings that made up the complex. One, which overlooked the sea on the south side of the city, was known as the Porphyra. It contained one room whose walls were lined with purple marble and purple silk hangings. Since the eighth century it had been reserved for the lying-in of Byzantine empresses, so that it could be said that the heir of a

reigning emperor was 'Porphyrogenitos' or 'born in the purple' and so earmarked to succeed his father.<sup>14</sup>

Another building frequently referred to was the Boukoleon which overlooked the Sea of Marmara at the southern end of the complex. The Boukoleon had its own harbour with a flight of marble steps leading down to the water where a vessel for the emperor's use was moored. The name derived from a statue of an ox (*bous*) being attacked by a lion (*leôn*) which stood on the harbour wall. The lion was depicted with its left foot on the ox's horn and it was clearly twisting round its victim's head to make a bite at its throat.<sup>15</sup> Then there was the Dekan-neakubita or 'the hall of the nineteen couches'. It was the emperor's custom to entertain eighteen guests to dinner there every Christmas day, the diners reclining on couches and being served on vessels of gold. The hall known as the Magnavra contained the emperor's throne room. The interiors of buildings such as these, floors, walls and ceiling, were usually decorated with sumptuous mosaics.<sup>16</sup>

This apparently random collection of buildings had a serious purpose behind it, that of providing a fitting setting for the office of emperor of the Romans and of impressing on subjects and visitors the power and majesty of the current incumbent and his unique relationship with Almighty God. As in other parts of the city, therefore, the imperial image was everywhere. Inside the Brazen Gate, Justinian and Theodora stared down at new arrivals. In the building known as the Kainourgion, Basil I (867–86) and his family covered the ceiling, the children shown carrying Bibles to show how they were being instructed in divine law. John II Komnenos (1118–43) decorated the so-called Golden Chamber with images of his father, Alexios I.<sup>17</sup>

The Great Palace contained something that was far more important in establishing the link between God and his vicegerent, for it was home to a special chapel, dedicated to the Holy Virgin of Pharos. The chapel was so-called because of its proximity to the lighthouse or Pharos that formed the last link in a chain of hilltop beacons which had, in more troubled times, stretched across Asia Minor to give prior warning of Arab raids. Inside, the dome and ceiling were decorated with the usual mosaics depicting Christ and the Virgin, but the chapel also boasted a jewel-encrusted altar, and even the hinges of its doors

were made of silver.<sup>18</sup> There was a very good reason for the lavish decoration, for the Pharos chapel housed a number of relics closely associated with Jesus Christ himself.

Foremost among them were two sections of the cross on which Christ had hung during the crucifixion on Mount Calvary, known as the True Cross to distinguish it from the many imitations.<sup>19</sup> According to legend, the True Cross had been discovered by Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, while she was on pilgrimage in Jerusalem. With the help of the Archbishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, she had organized an archaeological excavation at Calvary, and after having demolished the pagan temple of Aphrodite which stood on the site had duly unearthed three crosses. To discern which was the True Cross from those on which the two thieves had hung, Archbishop Macarius brought them one after another to the bedside of a sick woman. When the shadow of the True Cross fell across her, the woman was immediately healed. The precious relic was then placed in a silver casket and kept in a church that was erected on the site, although Helena took part of the cross back with her to Constantinople.<sup>20</sup>

In the course of time, more of the True Cross was to end up in Constantinople. In June 614 a Persian army captured Jerusalem after a three-week siege, and much of the city was burned. The True Cross was carried off with the rest of the booty to Ctesiphon, the capital of Sassanid Persia, where it only survived because the wife of the Persian king was a Christian and so took good care of it. Fourteen years later, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius led his army into Persia to take revenge and, having virtually wiped out the Persian army at Nineveh, forced the king to accept peace and to hand back the True Cross. The relic was brought back to Jerusalem, amidst great rejoicing in March 630.<sup>21</sup> When the Arabs invaded Byzantine Syria in 634 and Jerusalem was once more threatened, Heraclius took the True Cross with him back to Constantinople to reunite it with the section taken there by Helena.<sup>22</sup> There it had remained ever since.

Another famed relic preserved in the Pharos chapel was the Mandylion of Edessa, a small cloth on which was imprinted what was held to be a miraculous image of the face of Christ. Numerous legends abounded about how the Mandylion had come into being, but the most

commonly believed was this. During the lifetime of Christ, Abgar, the ruler of the town of Edessa (now Urfa in eastern Turkey), had sent an emissary to Jesus begging him to come and heal him from arthritis and leprosy. Jesus had declined but instead washed his face in water and then dried it on a piece of cloth. The image of Christ's face was left on the cloth and he gave it to Abgar's emissary to take back to Edessa. On receiving the cloth, Abgar was healed of all his illnesses and, along with the entire population of Edessa, was converted to Christianity. The cloth or Mandylion was credited with saving the city from a Persian attack in 544. It was then reverently preserved in Edessa until 944 when a Byzantine army laid siege to Edessa. The city's Muslim rulers decided to buy security by giving up the Mandylion. The precious relic was then carried back to Constantinople in triumph, which was only fitting, according to the Byzantine emperor of the day, because the Queen of Cities had 'the undoubted right to rule all'. The Byzantines later acquired the autograph letter supposedly written by Christ to Abgar, though sadly this was lost or destroyed in a riot in 1185.<sup>23</sup>

Also in the chapel were a number of other relics associated with Christ, such as his sandals, the tunic which he had worn at the time of his passion, the Crown of Thorns, the lance which pierced his side, and a small phial containing what purported to be some of his blood. Oddest of all, perhaps, was the *Keramion* or Holy Tile, a ceramic tile on which the face of Christ had been miraculously imprinted. There were also relics of major saints such as the right arm of John the Baptist and the head of St Paul.<sup>24</sup> The possession of these objects added enormously to the prestige of the Byzantine emperor. Visiting kings were unfailingly taken to visit the chapel so that they could see for themselves these 'signs of divine protection' and draw the appropriate conclusion.<sup>25</sup>

The Great Palace was also the setting for elaborate ceremonial which had exactly the same end in view: to 'evoke the admiration both of strangers and of our own subjects'.<sup>26</sup> All foreign dignitaries and ambassadors were to be received in a splendid audience chamber inside the Magnavra hall. They were led in to the strains of organ music by an official holding a golden staff and were expected to prostrate themselves three times on the floor before the throne. While this

was happening, two bronze lions that stood next to the throne would suddenly start to roar and the birds in a gilded tree would burst into song, no doubt to the astonishment of the envoys, while the emperor's throne could be mechanically lifted up so that he could gaze down on his grovelling visitors on the floor below. He was a sight to behold:

The emperor himself was seated on a couch decorated with two head rests. The couch was raised on a high platform and overlaid with gold. Under his feet was a stool. A magnificent robe gave him an air of great distinction. Very proudly he held up his head and puffed out his chest (an effort that caused his cheeks to take on a deep red tinge), while his eyes with their faraway gaze, showed plainly that he was thinking profoundly and wholly given up to his own meditations.

The whole set-up was designed to present the emperor as almost superhuman by virtue of his office. The only concession was made to visiting monarchs, who were not expected to grovel on the floor. They were, however, given a seat that was deliberately placed lower down than the throne of their host, to emphasize his superior position as emperor of the Romans.<sup>27</sup>

The same applied to the endless round of ceremonies which took up much of the emperor's time while he was resident in the Great Palace. Every year on Holy Saturday, for example, the emperor would process from the Great Palace to the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia. Inside the church the procession would pass the cover of the Holy Well, where Christ spoke to the Samaritan woman, and enter the sanctuary followed by a eunuch carrying a bag containing 100 pounds of gold. An official would then take the bag from the eunuch and hand it to the emperor who would then lay it on the altar and cense it with incense. So it went on throughout the ceremony, with ritual actions and greetings prescribed for particular locations throughout the city. Tedious and occasionally rather silly as such rituals might seem, they were carefully adapted for their purpose, being designed, as one emperor

put it, to make the imperial power 'more admirable to foreigners and to our own people'.<sup>28</sup>

In general, they seem to have worked. An Arab visitor to Constantinople who witnessed an imperial procession as it wound from the Brazen Gate to the cathedral of Hagia Sophia was clearly impressed:

[The emperor] is preceded by ten thousand elders wearing clothes of red brocade; their hair reaches their shoulders, and they wear no upper cloak. Then behind them come ten thousand young men wearing clothes of white brocade. All go on foot. Then come ten thousand boys dressed in clothes of green brocade. Then come ten thousand servants wearing clothes of brocade the colour of the blue sky; in their hands they hold axes covered with gold. Behind them follow five thousand chosen eunuchs wearing white Khorasian clothes of half silk; in their hands they hold golden crosses. Then after them come ten thousand Turkish and Khorasian pages wearing striped breastplates; in their hands they hold spears and shields wholly covered with gold. Then come a hundred most dignified patricians wearing clothes of coloured brocade; in their hands they have gold censers perfumed with aloes. Then come twelve chief patricians with clothes woven with gold; each of them holds a golden rod.<sup>29</sup>

The numbers are clearly exaggerated but the effect is clear: even a potentially hostile observer was impressed by the spectacle and pageantry. This was not always the case. An ambassador from Italy who witnessed a similar ceremony in 968 recorded it with a much more jaundiced eye:

A numerous company of tradesmen and low born persons, collected on this solemn occasion to welcome and honour [the Emperor] Nikephoros

[II Phokas], lined the sides of the road, like walls, from the palace to Hagia Sophia, tricked out with thin little shields and cheap spears ... His nobles for their part, who with their master passed through the plebeian and barefoot multitude, were dressed in tunics that were too large for them and were also because of their extreme age full of holes. They would have looked better if they had worn their ordinary clothes.<sup>30</sup>

Individual reactions, however, make no difference to the main point of all this pageantry. The Byzantines were constantly exerting themselves to promote the special status of their city and their emperor, whether through imperial portraits in mosaic, grandiose palaces or by ostentatious public display.

The everyday reality of Byzantine politics was, of course, much less impressive than the theory and the ceremony. In 1200 the heir of Constantine the Great who ruled the Byzantine empire was Alexios III (1195–1203), a monarch about whom posterity has had little good to say. His contemporary, the historian Niketas Choniates, presents him as a far cry from the ideal emperor, a spendthrift who neglected the interests of the empire while busying himself with trivial pursuits, such as building new bath houses and planting vineyards at a time when he should have been attending to the defences of Constantinople.<sup>31</sup> Most unedifying of all was the way in which Alexios III had come to the throne.

Alexios was not a *Porphyrogenitos*. He had not been born in the Purple Chamber in the Great Palace and his father had not been a reigning emperor. He was a scion of a wealthy Constantinopolitan family, one of six sons of veteran soldier Andronicus Angelos and his wife Euphrosyne. These were, however, troubled times. On 24 September 1180, after a reign of thirty-eight years, the redoubtable emperor Manuel I Komnenos had died, leaving as his heir an eleven-year-old boy, his son Alexios II (1180–3). A council of regency therefore had to be formed under the child's mother, Maria of Antioch, with real power in the hands of a nephew of the late emperor, Alexios Komnenos, who



held the title of *protosebastos*. The regency of Maria and Alexios soon proved unpopular in Constantinople, and in 1182 another of Manuel I's kinsmen, Andronicus Komnenos, staged a revolt and led an army across Asia Minor towards Constantinople.

As a prominent nobleman, Angelos could not avoid becoming involved in these events. He was sent by the regency with a force to crush the rebel but he ended up switching sides and fleeing with his family to the opposing camp. The Angelos family were to regret that move. Once Andronicus Komnenos had captured Constantinople and installed himself as the new regent to the young emperor, he instituted a reign of terror in which prominent aristocrats were his main victims. Realizing that he might be the next target, Andronicus Angelos entered into a conspiracy against the regent. When it was betrayed, most of the plotters were rounded up and executed, but Angelos and his sons, including Alexios, escaped their pursuers when they reached the coast and found a boat full of empty wine jars. Heaving the jars into the sea, they crowded aboard and succeeded in eluding Andronicus's forces. Having reached a safe distance, father and sons scattered to maximize their chances. Alexios went to Syria where he was given asylum at the court of the Ayyubid Sultan, the famous Saladin.<sup>32</sup>

Not all the brothers went so far. Theodore and Isaac Angelos ended up in Bithynia in Asia Minor where they found refuge in the cities of Nicaea and Prousa whose inhabitants had refused to accede to Andronicus Komnenos's coup. Determined to crush all opposition, Andronicus set out to besiege these towns. Nicaea held out at first and the regent was forced to bring up siege engines to attack the walls. He even had Isaac Angelos's mother, Euphrosyne, brought from Constantinople and used the frail old lady as a human shield by placing her in front of a battering ram as it was hauled towards the walls. The stratagem failed. The Nicaeans carefully shot their arrows around Euphrosyne, killing the soldiers who were guarding her, and then sallied forth to rescue her. When the leader of the rebellion, Theodore Kantakouzenos, was killed in a skirmish, however, the spirit of the defenders flagged. Isaac Angelos negotiated peace with Andronicus. The town opened its gates and Isaac was sent back to Constantinople

to live peacefully in the family mansion there, though several other prominent men among the defenders were executed.

This latter action prompted the people of Prousa to put up stiffer resistance. The city had to be taken by storm and large numbers of its inhabitants were massacred. Theodore Angelos was taken prisoner and Andronicus gave orders that he should be blinded. Clearly, already Andronicus feared that some member of the Angelos family might be planning to replace him. The unfortunate Theodore was then placed on an ass which was then sent trotting off to wander where it would. Theodore would doubtless have starved had not some Turks from the neighbouring sultanate of Konya found him and taken pity on him.<sup>33</sup>

Back in Constantinople, Andronicus Komnenos had by now had himself crowned emperor as Andronicus I (1183–5) and had disposed of the young Alexios by having the unfortunate lad strangled with a bow string. His corpse was brought to Andronicus so that he could kick it before it was dumped in the Bosphorus.<sup>34</sup> Donning the imperial purple did not set Andronicus's mind at rest, however. He saw conspiracies everywhere and scarcely a day went by without some unfortunate wretch being arraigned and executed. Inevitably, his suspicion fell on Isaac, the only member of the Angelos family within his reach. On the evening of 11 September 1185, a number of armed men led by Stephen Hagiochristophorites arrived at the Angelos mansion bearing orders to arrest him. As they pounded on the doors, Isaac cowered inside, but then, reasoning that he was likely to die anyway, he crept to the stables and saddled a horse. His pursuers were taken completely by surprise as Isaac charged out sword in hand and had no time to react before he killed Hagiochristophorites with a single blow to the head and cut off the ear of one of the others. Isaac then galloped down the Mese towards Hagia Sophia to take sanctuary.

News of these dramatic events soon spread and popular demonstrations broke out against the by now universally detested Andronicus. Sensing that all was lost, Andronicus left Constantinople by ship in the hope of sailing across the Black Sea to Russia. Unfortunately, the current carried the ship back to shore before it could make much headway. Andronicus was taken prisoner, dragged back to Constantinople and

lynched in the Hippodrome by the furious crowd.<sup>35</sup> Isaac Angelos now found himself emperor as Isaac II (1185–95).

Naturally, one of Isaac's first moves was to recall the scattered members of his family to the capital. His father, Andronicus Angelos, seems by this time to have died, but Alexios was brought back from Syria and given the prestigious title of *sebastokrator*. Isaac had a particular affection for Alexios because he was the only one of the six brothers who had escaped completely unscathed during Andronicus's reign of terror.<sup>36</sup>

Alexios seems to have had little gratitude for his brother's kindness. By the spring of 1195, he was plotting to seize the throne and had gathered a group of supporters. These seem to have included an individual called Alexios Doukas Mourtzouphlos. Mourtzouphlos, whose last name was a nickname meaning 'blackened and blind', because his dark, bushy eyebrows met over his nose and hung over his eyes, was to play an important part in Constantinople's political life over the next few years.<sup>37</sup> In April 1195, Alexios accompanied Isaac II on a military expedition against insurgents in Thrace. The campaign was a leisurely one, and while based near the town of Kypsella, Isaac had time to go hunting. He invited his brother, the *sebastokrator*, to join him, but Alexios complained of feeling unwell so the emperor went off without him. Left behind in the camp, Alexios and his fellow conspirators seized the imperial regalia which had been left behind in a tent, and Isaac returned to discover that his brother had been proclaimed emperor in his place. Isaac's first reaction was to try a repeat of his tactic against his tormentors ten years before, and he spurred his horse to make a charge against the conspirators in the camp. He lost heart, however, when he saw that none of his servants would follow him. He then fled west to a small port called Makre, doubtless hoping to escape by sea, but he was apprehended and taken to a nearby monastery. There, like his brother Theodore before him, Isaac was blinded before being taken back to Constantinople to be imprisoned first in the dungeons beneath the Palace of Boukoleon, and then at Diplokionion on the Bosporus.<sup>38</sup>

It might be thought that after having perpetrated such a crime against his own brother, Alexios would never have been accepted in

Constantinople as emperor. While outsiders might find such regular bloodletting disturbing, a German monk noting with distaste the tendency of the Byzantines to 'butcher or blind their own kings',<sup>39</sup> the Byzantines seem to have accepted it as the way in which God appointed his vicegerent on Earth. Consequently, even before Alexios arrived back in the capital, the great and the good were quick to throw in their lot with the new regime. They hastened to find Alexios's wife Euphrosyne and 'placed their heads under her feet as foot stools, nuzzled their noses against her felt slipper like fawning puppies and stood timidly at her side, bringing their feet together and joining their hands'. Within days, Alexios had been crowned by the patriarch in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. The only objector appears to have been the horse that was led forward to bear him away from the ceremony. It bucked and reared so violently when the new emperor tried to mount, that his jewelled crown was knocked off his head and damaged. Another, more placid steed had to be found.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the readiness of the court and people of Constantinople to accept the coup of 1195 is not really surprising but it still fits very uneasily with Eusebius's portrait of the emperor as the imitation of God.

Given the dangers attendant on being the emperor of Byzantium, one might initially wonder why there were so many individuals who, like Alexios III, were prepared to go to such extraordinary lengths and to risk everything to reach the throne. The fact was that being emperor gave access to almost limitless wealth which provided certain compensations for the burden of being God's deputy on Earth. Eusebius had painted an austere portrait of Constantine, spending hours on his knees at prayer in the Great Palace,<sup>41</sup> but for those who had a taste for the high life the possibilities were endless. Alexios III, according to Choniates, believed that he had been given the throne 'not to exercise lawful dominion over men but to supply himself with lavish luxury and pleasures'.<sup>42</sup>

He was by no means alone in that assumption and it would appear that while some parts of the Great Palace were designed to parade the majesty of the imperial office, there were other, more private sections. Here the mosaics displayed not pious emperors but humorous scenes

of cavorting animals and playful children. In one surviving set of floor mosaics, a man tumbles backwards off a donkey, which seems to be giving him a kick for good measure. Another shows two boys riding on a camel. Hunting scenes were a favourite subject.<sup>43</sup> On the outside, because it was a collection of buildings rather than a single edifice, the Great Palace had room for extensive gardens. There were shady porticoes, a courtyard for playing ball games and numerous fountains.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, by 1200 the Byzantine emperors were not confined to the Great Palace. They used to spend much of their time in the rather less formal surroundings of their second palace in Constantinople, that of Blachernae. Situated close to the Land Walls and overlooking the Golden Horn, it had come into use much more recently. It was the favoured residence of the emperors of the Komnenos family, one of whom, Manuel I Komnenos (1143–80), had extended it, installed long galleries and commissioned new mosaics.<sup>45</sup> The result was a rather more compact and practical residence than the Great Palace, though no less impressive to visitors. One observer, writing in the mid-twelfth century, commented that:

The Palace of Blachernae, although having foundations laid on low ground, achieves eminence through excellent construction and elegance and, because of its surroundings on three sides, affords its inhabitants the triple pleasure of looking out upon sea, fields and city. Its exterior is of almost matchless beauty, but its interior surpasses anything that I can say about it. Throughout it is decorated elaborately with gold and a great variety of colours, and the floor is marble, paved with cunning workmanship; and I do not know whether the exquisite art or the exceedingly valuable stuffs endows it with the more beauty or value.<sup>46</sup>

The emperor also had the use of a number of smaller palaces outside the city walls. Among them were Philopation, just outside the Golden Gate in the Land Walls, and Skoutarion close to Chrysopolis on the Asian side of the Bosphorus.<sup>47</sup>

These were the places where the emperors could relax and enjoy the sweets of power to the full. Hunting was probably the commonest imperial pastime. Emperors would either sally forth into the countryside from the Palace of Blachernae or spend a few days in the extensive stretch of parkland that surrounded the Philopation, which was well stocked with game, particularly boar and wild asses.<sup>48</sup> Some emperors seem to have derived immeasurable delight from the chase and pursued their quarry with reckless abandon. Basil I is credited with bringing down a deer and a wolf by throwing his club at them and breaking their back legs. When confronted on one occasion by a large lion-like creature, most of Manuel I's retinue ran away. The emperor, however, stood his ground and despatched the animal with his sword.<sup>49</sup> Isaac I Komnenos particularly enjoyed bringing down crane with a bow and arrow:

He would shoot them down from the sky, and truly his pleasure in this was not unmixed with wonder. The wonder was that a bird so exceptionally big, with feet and legs like lances, hiding itself behind the clouds, should in the twinkling of an eye be caught by an object so much smaller than itself. The pleasure he derived was from the bird's fall, for the crane, as it fell, danced the dance of death, turning over and over, now on its back, now on its belly.<sup>50</sup>

There were other pleasures opened up by the imperial office. Many Byzantines loved chariot races, but the imperial incumbent had no need to watch them with the common herd in the Hippodrome. He could stage his own in the privacy of one of his palaces, as Alexios III did at Blachernae in 1199 to celebrate the marriages of his daughters. Then there were the pleasures of the table with many emperors earning themselves reputations as gourmets and gluttons. Emperors also had plenty of scope for indulging their sexual tastes. One discovered that there was no one to gainsay him if he wished to sleep with his niece, and another used to take parties of prostitutes out into the countryside during the summer months for open-air orgies.<sup>51</sup>

Even when out on campaign with their armies, Byzantine emperors were not inclined to rough it. A tenth-century military treatise lays down that the equipment to be taken into the field should include thick tufted rugs for reclining on, a bath with a hide cistern of red leather, flax-blue cushions, silver coolers for scented wine and rose-water, two gilded chairs concealing chamber pots, silken sheets, linen towels, assorted ointments and perfumes and the imperial silver table service. For the transport of this last item alone some eighty pack animals were required.<sup>52</sup>

Such were the material benefits of the imperial office. One emperor who had enjoyed them all to the full during his ten-year reign had been Alexios III's brother, Isaac II:

Daily he fared sumptuously and served up a sybaritic table, tasting the most delectable sauces, heaping up the bread, and feasting on a lair of wild beasts, a sea of fish, and an ocean of deep-red wine. On alternate days, when he took pleasure in the baths, he smelled of sweet unguents and was sprinkled with oils of myrrh ... The dandy strutted about like a peacock and never wore the same garment twice, coming forth daily from the palace like a bridegroom out of his bridal chamber or the sun rising out of a beauteous mere.<sup>53</sup>

By 1200, of course, Isaac's circumstances were rather different. He was blind and a prisoner while his brother Alexios enjoyed the lifestyle that he had lost. No wonder that Isaac plotted and schemed, hoping against hope one day to be restored to his rightful place on the throne and to all the perquisites that came with it.<sup>54</sup>

In view of what has been said so far, it might be wondered how the Byzantine empire survived for so many centuries, when the main elements in its political structure were high-sounding theory masking endless political intrigue and personal gratification. Had that been the case, then the empire probably would not have survived. The fact is that just as Byzantine political theory covered over the seamier

side of life at the top, it also obscured one of the greatest strengths of Byzantine government: that the responsibility for running the empire did not in actual fact rest with only one man.

The theory was clear on this point. When it came to affairs of state, it was frequently said, the Byzantine emperor was like a helmsman, standing alone at the tiller, guiding the ship through the buffeting waves. Or else, he was like the sun, shining alone in the firmament.<sup>55</sup> Yet the emperor could rely on a number of sources of support. He stood at the summit of a ruling class who provided many of his generals and advisers. He had the use of a sophisticated bureaucracy based in the Great Palace. Last, and by no means least, he had the often formidable assistance of his wife and female relatives.

By the year 1200, the Byzantine ruling class was a very visible group in Constantinople. Their mansions and palaces lined the Mese, the Triumphal Way and the other principal thoroughfares and were clustered in the area known as Sphorakion to the north of the Forum of Constantine. Some were miniature versions of the Great Palace, consisting not of just one building but of a complex of them, including bathhouses and private chapels, their interiors decorated with expensive mosaics. The names of these great families, Komnenos, Palaiologos, Bryennios, Botaneiates, Doukas, Kamateros, Kantakouzenos and, of course, Angelos, crop up again and again. For by the late twelfth century, their members monopolized many of the highest positions in the army and in the Church and bore sonorous honorific titles such as *Patrikios*, *Magistros* and *Protostrator*. Many were linked to the imperial family by marriage or descent.<sup>56</sup>

The same people surrounded the emperor at court and constituted the membership of the Senate, which was by now a purely honorific body. They followed him from the Great Palace to Blachernae and, when the heat of the city became unbearable in the summer, out into the countryside to one of the suburban palaces. Here they would discuss affairs of state with the emperor and help him to decide policy. Anna Comnena recalled that her father, Alexios I, used to talk over such matters with her uncle, George Palaiologos.<sup>57</sup>

Yet although the great families of Constantinople were the constant companions of the emperor and provided many of his most important



generals and officers, they also presented the greatest threat. It was, after all, from their ranks that usurpers were most likely to arise, for they had the resources and personal authority to gather an army and lead it against Constantinople. This was the fear that had prompted Andronicus I to embark on his reign of terror in 1183–5, for he reasoned that if he got rid of the giants, there would only be pygmies to rule over. His fears proved to be justified when he was toppled by Isaac Angelos.<sup>58</sup>

The emperors must therefore have been grateful for their second source of support, bureaucrats of the Great Palace who filled the higher offices in the administration. They too bore grandiloquent titles such as *Megas Logothetes* (Chief Minister) and *Epi tou Kanikleiou* (literally ‘He who holds the Inkstand’). Their main duties were to draft letters, laws, decrees and treaties, to oversee the treasury and postal services, and to organize the collection of taxes. In many cases, however, they were far more influential than that. Prominent individuals often advised the emperor on policy and tactics. The lowlier individuals carried out the vital task of publicizing and explaining that policy in public, by means of formal speeches on special occasions, praising the reigning emperor and his achievements.

Entry into this elite cadre was dependent not on birth but on education. Entrants had to have completed the traditional course of higher education in the Greek classics. This did not in itself provide much in the way of vocational qualification for the task of administering an empire, but it did give the opportunity to those of relatively modest backgrounds to get a foot on the ladder. Michael Psellos (c. 1022–c. 1080), who rose to become the most important adviser to successive emperors during the eleventh century, had no link to any of the great families of Constantinople, but he could recite Homer by heart and that was enough to obtain him his first post as a secretary at court. With that kind of example in mind, an ambitious father counselled his son:

Learn your letters as much as you are able. See that man over there, my child: he used to walk on foot, and now he has a fat mule with a fine harness. This one, when he was a student, used to go barefoot, and see

him now in his pointed boots! This other one, when he was a student, never combed his hair, and now he is well combed and proud of his locks. That one in his student days never saw a bath door from afar, and now he bathes three times a week. That one was full of lice as big as almonds and now his purse is full of gold pieces with the emperor Manuel's effigy.<sup>59</sup>

As the author of this passage went on to say, education did not necessarily guarantee a place at court, and Constantinople was full of highly educated but impecunious men. Those who did make it by virtue of their educational accomplishments alone, like Psellos, would have had a vested interest in supporting the reigning emperor on whose patronage they depended. After all, new emperors tended to rid themselves of the counsellors of the old regime and bring in creatures of their own,<sup>60</sup> although Psellos himself was remarkable for his ability to survive changes of ruler. They could therefore generally be counted on to remain loyal, at least until things had reached such a pass that they realized that the time had come to sink or swim.

There was another reason why members of the bureaucracy were more trustworthy than the aristocracy. Many of them were eunuchs, and as such they were specifically prohibited by virtue of their physical mutilation from occupying the imperial throne. Emperors could entrust them with the highest powers of state without fear that they might make a bid for the throne. Some eunuchs had arrived in Constantinople as slaves, either captives in war or even as gifts from foreign ambassadors, but many were of Byzantine origin. It was not uncommon for parents to castrate one of their sons as a baby, a practice that was particularly common in Paphlagonia in northern Asia Minor. That might appear cruel, but it did give the boy an opportunity for a glittering career at court in later life. No less than ten of the most important posts at court that involved close contact with the emperor were specifically reserved for eunuchs, including that of *Parakoimomenos* or chamberlain, whose splendid title meant 'He who keeps watch alongside' the imperial person. Childhood castration certainly worked well for a

certain John who came from humble origins in Paphlagonia to hold the office of *Orphanotrophos* at the Byzantine court.<sup>61</sup>

Some members of the imperial bureaucracy rose to positions of extraordinary power and influence. A notable example is Basil Lekapenos. An illegitimate son of an emperor, Romanos I Lekapenos (920–44), Basil had been castrated in infancy to preclude any attempt on the throne in later life and was given a job in the palace administration. He rose to become *Parakoimomenos*, a post he was to hold during the reigns of four emperors and from which he commanded extraordinary influence. Not only did Basil dominate the administration of the empire, he also commanded armies in the field and played an important role in bringing new emperors to power in 963 and 969. For many years, therefore, he was the most powerful individual in the Great Palace.<sup>62</sup> He was by no means unique in wielding such power. During the eleventh century, Michael Psellos, who was not a eunuch, could boast that the emperor was ready to follow whatever course of action he advised. This was still the case in Alexios III's day, for the chief *Parakoimomenos* George Oinaïotes was an extremely influential voice at court. In 1197, he succeeded in persuading Alexios to make an attack on the Vlach leader, Chrysos, in the town of Prosakon, although the assault proved a humiliating failure.<sup>63</sup>

Apart from the aristocracy and the bureaucrats, there was a third group at court which exerted a powerful influence on the emperor and on the way he ruled: the emperor's mother, sisters and other female relatives, and his wife the empress. For them a special section of the Great Palace and the Palace of Blachernae was set aside, the so-called *gynai-konitis* or women's quarters. Never were theory and practice more at odds in Byzantium than when it came to their role in government. The theory was that women could play no role in public life. They could not act as judges or bankers, were generally veiled in public and their frequently cited role model was Penelope in the *Odyssey* who patiently waited at home and wove a tapestry until her husband returned from the Trojan War. Consequently, as Michael Psellos pointed out, it would be improper for the Roman empire to be governed by a woman, rather than by a man.<sup>64</sup>

Yet in spite of all that, a succession of powerful women had moulded Byzantine history and culture, starting with Helena, the mother of Constantine. Theodora, the consort of the great Justinian, was so deeply involved in affairs of state that a male contemporary exclaimed in horror that 'she claimed the right to administer the whole Roman empire!' Eirene, the widow of Leo IV (775–80) even ruled the empire alone between 797 and 802, though she had to describe herself as an emperor, rather than as an empress, in legal documents in order to preserve decorum.<sup>65</sup>

A more recent example had been the extraordinary position occupied by Anna Dalassena, the mother of Alexios I Komnenos. Alexios had seized power in a coup in 1081, but for the first years of his reign there was no doubt where real power lay:

In all matters, however ordinary, he did nothing without [his mother's] advice: she gradually became his confidante and co-partner in government. Gradually and surreptitiously he involved her more and more in state affairs; on occasions he even declared openly that without her brains and good judgement the Empire would not survive.<sup>66</sup>

When, a few months after his accession, Alexios was compelled to lead his army against the Normans who had invaded the Balkan provinces, it was Anna Dalassena whom he appointed to rule in the capital in his absence. A special gold-sealed document or *chrysobull* was issued proclaiming that any decrees made by Anna would have the same validity as those of the emperor himself.<sup>67</sup>

Anna Dalassena certainly seems to have been a formidable individual. Courtiers quailed before her very glance, and her arrival in the Great Palace was the signal for sweeping moral reforms. She insisted that everyone participate in communal hymn-singing and expected that they keep to strict breakfast times. She was also a noted patron of monks and hermits and left a monument in the church and monastery of Christ the All-Seeing (*Pantepoptes*) which she founded and endowed.<sup>68</sup>

In 1200, women still played an important role in the politics of the Byzantine court, with the empress Euphrosyne standing at the centre of much of the intrigue. She had played an important part in Alexios III's coup in 1195 by persuading the court and the patriarch to accept the downfall of Isaac II and to proclaim Alexios as emperor when he returned to Constantinople from Thrace.<sup>69</sup> A member of one of the great families of Constantinople, the Kamateroi, Euphrosyne seems to have ensured that the elevation of her husband to the purple therefore brought benefits for the whole clan. Her brother, Basil Kamateros, became prominent at court while her brother-in-law, Michael Stryphnos was appointed admiral of the fleet.<sup>70</sup> She also involved herself with the everyday business of government, which inevitably brought down on her the fury of the contemporary historian Niketas Choniates:

Because the empress had overstepped the bounds and held in contempt the conventions of former Roman empresses, the empire was divided into two dominions. It was not the emperor alone who issued commands as he chose; she gave orders with equal authority and often nullified the emperor's decrees, altering them to her liking.<sup>71</sup>

Euphrosyne's interference in government may not have been as unhelpful as Choniates implies. Alexios had not been emperor long before Euphrosyne became alarmed at the way that he was frittering away the revenues. She therefore secured the appointment as her minister of a certain Constantine Mesopotamites, who had held office under the previous regime. The idea seems to have been that Mesopotamites would bring some order into the empire's currently rather chaotic financial affairs.

This well-meant move had serious repercussions. The appointment of Mesopotamites enraged Basil Kamateros and other of Euphrosyne's relatives who had been doing rather well under the old system where nobody asked too many questions. There was little that they could do to remove the hated minister, so they decided to strike at Euphrosyne instead. In the summer of 1196, they secured an audi-

ence with Alexios and accused the empress of adultery with a young general called Vatatzes. The emperor, who seems to have suffered from extraordinary gullibility, had Vatatzes murdered without further question and had some of the palace eunuchs and chambermaids tortured to extort evidence. After vacillating for a time and even dining cosily with Euphrosyne at Blachernae as if nothing had happened, Alexios suddenly acted and banished her to a nunnery on the Black Sea.

She was only in disgrace for six months, however. During that time her relatives relented, realizing that they had brought shame on their family and never having dreamt that the normally emollient Alexios would act so drastically. Meanwhile Constantine Mesopotamites lobbied tirelessly for the empress's recall. Alexios gave way, and in the spring of 1197 Euphrosyne returned. Before long she was more powerful than ever.<sup>72</sup>

Byzantine political theory had nothing to say about bureaucrats, eunuchs or women. Yet it was they who made the whole system workable. However self-indulgent, bloodthirsty or simply mediocre the imperial incumbent was, there was always a body of older, wiser heads to advise and restrain him. Moreover, when, as often happened, the emperor was toppled and replaced, there was an element of continuity. In spite of the inevitable purges, there would always be some bureaucrats left to carry on with business as usual in the Great Palace, and in some cases the new emperor would even marry his predecessor's wife. While the panegyrists regurgitated the theory and soldiers and aristocrats schemed and jockeyed for position in the corridors of the Great Palace and the Palace of Blachernae, the task of government went on.

## CHAPTER 5

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# *Churches and Monasteries*

The Byzantines regarded Constantinople not just as a ruling city, but also as a holy one. A number of ingredients made up this claim. They included the supposed foundation of the city's church by the Apostle Andrew, its acquisition of an unrivalled collection of relics, its divine protection against capture, and the clear mark of God's favour in prompting Constantine to move his capital there. Constantinople was one of five cities whose bishops were honoured with the title of patriarch, the others being Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. Moreover, by 1200 the Byzantines had come to see themselves as the guardians of correct Christian belief, or Orthodoxy, which had been defined by the seven Ecumenical Councils of the Church, starting with that of Nicaea in 325, a council that had been presided over by Constantine the Great.

Hence we find 'New Jerusalem', 'Leader of Faith' and the 'Guide of Orthodoxy' among Constantinople's many epithets.<sup>1</sup> There was, however, a particularly strong tension between myth and reality here, for it was difficult for Constantinople to be a holy place while also being a centre of political power and wealth.

The most striking and obvious aspect of Constantinople's claim to holiness, was the sheer number of churches and monasteries contained within its walls, described by one visitor as being 'infinite in number'.<sup>2</sup> Whereas in a western European medieval city the skyline would have been dominated by towers or spires, in Constantinople it was the wide domes with their surmounting crosses that would have spread across

the cityscape and which would have been one of the most striking features of the place when viewed for the first time.

This abundance of ecclesiastical buildings was partly the legacy of the great Justinian, who had built the two largest and most prominent, the cathedral of Hagia Sophia and the five-domed church of the Holy Apostles, as well as numerous smaller churches. It was also the result of a spate of church building and restoration that had begun in the ninth century, when the Byzantine empire recovered from its time of troubles. That process of construction and renovation had continued ever since, as each new emperor sought to leave his mark with some magnificent church or monastery. His successors in their turn exerted themselves to outdo him. Michael III (842–67) began the trend in a modest way when he reconstructed and redecorated the chapel of the Holy Virgin of Pharos, where the imperial collection of relics was kept.<sup>3</sup> Basil I (867–86) went further and ordered the building of a completely new church, the five-domed Nea Ekklesia within the precincts of the Great Palace which was inaugurated in 881. Its interior, in the words of a contemporary, gleamed ‘with gold and is resplendent with beautiful images as with stars’.<sup>4</sup> Romanos I Lekapenos (920–44) built the monastery of the Myrelaion as the burial place for himself and his family, probably because as a usurper who had sidelined the legitimate emperor he deemed it impolitic to assign himself a place in the mausoleum of the Holy Apostles. John I Tzimiskes (969–76) rebuilt the church of Christ the Saviour at the Brazen Gate of the Great Palace because he disliked the original cramped and inconvenient building.<sup>5</sup>

A further impetus for new building came in 1028 when, with the burial of Constantine VIII, there was no more room in the Heröon or anywhere else at the Holy Apostles for further deceased rulers.<sup>6</sup> The emperors thereafter vied with each other to build ever more magnificent and lavishly decorated churches and to establish new monasteries which would ultimately serve as their final resting place. Romanos III Argyros (1028–34) constructed the splendid church and monastery of the Virgin Peribleptos in the south of Constantinople, sparing no expense and ‘pouring rivers of gold’ into the project in an attempt to rival Hagia Sophia. He also took care to preserve his own memory by having it decorated with a mosaic depicting himself, and ultimately



he was buried there in a sarcophagus made of red jasper.<sup>7</sup> John II Komnenos (1118–43) founded the monastery of the Pantokrator, whose church was noted for its elaborate mosaic pavement and painted glass. His son, Manuel I, added to its prestige by securing a relic for it: the slab of red marble on which Christ had lain after his crucifixion. He had it shipped to Constantinople from Ephesus and, when it arrived at the harbour of Boukoleon, carried it up to the palace on his own back. After Manuel's death in 1180, the slab was used to surmount his tomb.<sup>8</sup> This tradition of imperial church building continued right up to 1200. Alexios III, not wanting the Angelos dynasty to lag behind in the competition, was probably responsible for the construction of the church of the Virgin Kyriotissa, close to the final section of the Aque-duct of Valens.<sup>9</sup>

It is very noticeable in the surviving descriptions of churches like the Nea Ekklesia, the Peribleptos and the Pantokrator that little of the expense in building them was lavished on their exteriors. Byzantine churches were, like those in medieval western Europe, constructed in the shape of a cross, but they had a square plan and lacked the long nave of Romanesque and Gothic architecture. They tended to be built of brick rather than stone and lacked the elaborate carving and tracery which graces the façades of western cathedrals.

Their most striking and costly feature was to be found on the inside, in the mosaic decoration which covered their walls and ceiling. The idea behind the decoration of Byzantine churches was that the moment that worshippers crossed the threshold, they left behind the material, everyday world and entered the Kingdom of Heaven. The square design of the church meant that they were at once surrounded and enfolded by the space: there was no long vista to a distant altar. Within that intimate space, the decorative scheme of mosaics was designed to act as a window onto the divine, conveying the people's veneration towards heaven and involving them in the metaphysical world. The effect was enhanced by following a strict pattern of iconography which divided the church into three levels. The lowest level depicted the saints, facing forward and gazing directly at the visitor, often at eyelevel. Above the saints, on the second level, on the higher walls and ceilings, were depicted selected incidents from the lives of

Christ and the Virgin Mary, particularly the Nativity, the baptism of Christ, the betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane, the crucifixion, and the death of the Virgin.

It was, however, at the third and highest level of the church that the two most important images were to be found. One was the Virgin and Child, which was always placed in the apse at the far end of the church, behind the altar, so that when the congregation were facing the priest and the altar screen or iconostasis they would also be facing the image of the Virgin and Child. The other, high up in the top of the dome, was the image of Christ Pantokrator. The word 'pantokrator' has two meanings in Greek. It can mean 'All-ruling', signifying that Christ was the ruler of all creation, but it can also mean 'All-holding'. The dome and its image stood directly over the place where the congregation were gathered. Their eyes would inevitably be drawn up to the figure in the dome, while Christ looked down, literally holding or enfolding his people, his hand lifted in blessing.<sup>10</sup>

To those who entered Byzantine churches, the effect of the glittering mosaics, whether viewed by flickering candlelight or lit up by the sun pouring in through the upper windows, must have been stunning. Some Russians reported that when they entered the churches of Constantinople 'we knew not whether we were in Heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty'.<sup>11</sup> Visual grandeur was a major ingredient in Constantinople's credentials as a holy city.

So universal and standardized was the scheme of decoration in Byzantine churches by the year 1200 that most Byzantines probably thought that it had always been that way. After all, Christ himself had made it clear that he wanted his image to be venerated and displayed. If he had not done so, he would never have sent the image of his face, imprinted on the Mandylion, to the ruler of Edessa. The Virgin Mary likewise had sat for her portrait by St Luke, who had thus created the famous Hodgetria icon. It was therefore believed that images such as these had been venerated from the earliest days of the Christian Church.<sup>12</sup>

As was so often the case in Byzantium, however, such beliefs were later formulations designed to justify the current situation. The use of religious imagery in this way was, in fact, of much more recent date.

Centuries before, the empire had been split asunder by a bitter dispute over whether it was even legitimate to depict Christ and the saints at all, let alone venerate those images in churches. The dispute lasted for over a century and a half, a period remembered as that of Iconoclasm, or the breaking of the icons.

The crisis had its origin in the later seventh century, when Byzantine armies were being repeatedly defeated in the field by the Muslim Arabs. So successful had the Muslims been that they had conquered the empire's eastern provinces of Syria, Palestine and Egypt, extinguished the last Byzantine toehold in North Africa and had even started to threaten Constantinople itself. As disaster followed disaster, many Byzantines began to ask why it was that Christians were being worsted by infidels. Fearful that they were being punished for some heinous sin, these doubters sought to discover what it was that the Christians were doing wrong. At first they were very poorly informed about the new religion of Islam, but they soon came to realize that Muslims were very particular about the matter of idolatry. Images of living beings were not generally permitted in mosques, in case the worshippers were tempted to misdirect their prayers away from God alone. In Byzantium, by contrast, it had become the practice to pray to icons, or pictures of Christ, the Virgin or one of the saints. The answer seemed clear. The Byzantines had fallen into the sin of idolatry, a practice sternly outlawed by the Second Commandment.

In 717 one of these opponents of icon veneration became emperor as Leo III (717–41). After fighting off the Arab threat to Constantinople, Leo fired the first shot in the conflict to come. In the year 726 a troop of soldiers was dispatched to the Brazen Gate of the Great Palace to remove the icon of Christ that was fixed there. News of what was happening soon spread and a hostile crowd, composed mainly of women and led by a certain Theodosia, surged across the Augusteion to the rescue. They rushed for the ladder on which one of the soldiers had perched himself in order to prise off the icon and pushed it away from the wall, sending the unfortunate man hurtling to his death. Theodosia was shortly afterwards despatched by the soldier's comrades who cut her throat with a ram's horn, or so at least the later tales would have it.<sup>13</sup>

The violence of the reaction may have prompted Leo to move more cautiously for the rest of his reign, but under his son and successor, Constantine V (741–75), all restraint was thrown aside. A church council was convened in February 754 in the Palace of Hieria on the Asian side of the Bosphorus where it was solemnly decreed that all icons were to be destroyed and the decoration of churches was to be changed so that only inanimate objects like the cross were depicted. It was not just churches that were affected by the decree. At the Milion, Constantine V ordered the removal of a series of depictions of the Ecumenical Councils of the Church and replaced them with one showing his favourite charioteer winning a race in the Hippodrome, although lionizing a sportsman might well be regarded as just another form of idolatry.<sup>14</sup>

Inevitably there was opposition, especially from monks, but Constantine V was not a man to be trifled with. One monk was flogged to death just for reproving the emperor, another was dragged through the streets and lynched.<sup>15</sup> When the protests continued, Constantine V went beyond attacking individual monks. He is supposed to have made a group of obdurate monks parade around the Hippodrome holding women by the hand, in front of a jeering crowd, and to have turned monasteries into barracks for soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

Yet in spite of all these measures, in the end the defenders of icon veneration, the so-called iconodules or iconophiles, won the argument and they did so by developing a sophisticated theology to justify their case. Foremost among them was John of Damascus (c. 665–749), a Greek who had held high office in the court of the Caliph in Damascus and later became a monk in a monastery near Jerusalem. As he lived in Arab territory, he was safe from iconoclast persecution and could write and say anything that he liked. In his three works in defence of icons, John justified their veneration on the basis of two ideas. The first was derived from Plato and the Neoplatonists: the image was a symbol and mediator. He drew a distinction between the icon itself and the person depicted on it. When you venerated an icon, that veneration was directed not to the wood of which the icon was made but to the saint who lay beyond it. The act of veneration of an icon was not, therefore, idolatry but a legitimate and praiseworthy act of worship.

In the second place, John went further and linked icon veneration to the incarnation, so that it was not just legitimate, but essential to orthodox Christian belief. Only by accepting icons could one accept the truth of the incarnation of Christ. If you denied that Christ could be depicted in wood and paint, you denied that he could be present in flesh and bone. John pointed to the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, when divine glory had shone around Jesus, and his disciples had bowed down and worshipped him. They were not worshipping the flesh and bone of which the human Christ was composed, but the Godhead which lay beyond it, and so it was with icons.<sup>17</sup>

These ideas ultimately won the day, and by the 780s iconoclasm was on the wane. At the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787 the decrees of the Council of Hieria were reversed and the veneration of icons was declared to be legitimate and orthodox. Iconoclasm had a brief revival between 815 and 842 but thereafter died out altogether. By the year 1200, the ideas of John of Damascus were encapsulated in every church in Constantinople. Each one acted as icon, its decoration providing a conduit through which the veneration of the worshippers passed from this material world to the ultimate spiritual reality that lay beyond. It was therefore not just the beauty of the decoration of Byzantine churches that enhanced Constantinople's aura of holiness but also the theological significance attached to the depiction of Christ and the saints.

There was yet another element in Constantinople's reputation as a holy city. It was also a centre for the monastic life, possessing around 300 monasteries and convents by the year 1200.<sup>18</sup> One of the largest and best-known monasteries in Constantinople in 1200 was that of St John Stoudios. Dedicated to St John the Baptist, the monastery took its name from the influential senator called Stoudios who had founded it in the fifth century. It was sequestered in the extreme south-west of the city, not far from the Golden Gate, its walls enclosing a complex of buildings, orchards and fountains. As one of its monks wrote, it provided an idyllic haven of calm amidst the bustle and temptations of the city:

No barbarian looks upon my face, no woman hears my voice. For a thousand years no useless man has entered the monastery, none of the female sex has trodden its court. I dwell in a cell that is like a palace; a garden, an olive grove and a vineyard surround me. On one hand is the great city with its market places and on the other the mother of churches and the empire of the world.<sup>19</sup>

It was not only prayer and contemplation that went on at the Stoudite monastery. It had been a hotbed of opposition to iconoclasm under its formidable abbot Theodore of Stoudios (759–826), and during the ninth century it became a centre both of monastic reform and of manuscript production. It also had a social function, providing a hospice for the sick and for travellers.<sup>20</sup>

Monks and nuns played an important role in all medieval societies. Most Christians were painfully aware that they themselves fell woefully short of the standards of life laid down in the Gospels. They therefore placed their hopes for salvation in the spiritual elite of men and women who had given up the good things of this world and who had dedicated themselves to the service of God. By their virtues and prayers, it was hoped, they would act as intercessors with God for the rest of humanity. Consequently, monks were revered by all classes of society. The very wealthy and prominent established and endowed new monasteries, leaving precise instructions to the monks to pray for their souls. The less affluent made gifts of money or food, again in the hope that the monks would remember them in their prayers.

While monks and monasteries were to be found throughout the Christian world, the monastic life was practised rather differently in Constantinople and the Byzantine empire. There were no monastic orders, along the lines of the Benedictines, Dominicans or Cistercians in western Europe, all Byzantine monks following instead the rule of St Basil. Byzantine monks wore a different type of habit from the familiar western one, covering their heads with a close-fitting black cowl. Perhaps most important of all, there was not quite the same emphasis on community and enclosure as was the case in the west. Byzantine

monasteries were marked by a strong streak of individualism and a tendency for monks to wander from place to place.

In many respects, a typical Byzantine monk was Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022). Born into a wealthy provincial family, Symeon lived a dissolute life in Constantinople as a young man before deciding to seek a life of holiness and entering the monastery of St John Stoudios. There he embarked on a regime of abstinence and self-denial so rigorous that it disturbed the rather self-satisfied calm of the place and caused resentment among the other monks. He was finally summoned before the abbot who demanded that Symeon tone down his ascetic lifestyle so as to fit in better with the community as a whole. In the end, Symeon lost patience with his less rigorous brethren. He quit the Stoudite monastery and went to the neighbouring house of St Mamas of Xerokerkos, a rather run down and dilapidated establishment, of which, at the age of thirty-one, he became abbot.<sup>21</sup>

That was not the end of his adventures. Symeon was clearly not an easy man to live with, and opposition and controversy followed him to his new home. He made it clear from the outset that he intended to be ‘an abbot of most untameable zeal’ and he was determined to reform St Mamas which, he said, had become a meeting place for worldly men. He got his way to start with, but he pushed his flock too far. His excessive zeal led to crisis as a group of thirty monks burst into the chapel and angrily barracked him while he was giving a sermon during matins. The strict regime that he had imposed on them had just become too much. In the face of determined opposition, Symeon resigned as abbot in 1005 and became an ordinary monk again. That did not end the controversy which seemed to follow Symeon wherever he went. He soon got involved in a theological dispute with an influential clergyman, Stephen, former Metropolitan of Nikomedia. The patriarchal synod took Stephen’s side and, in January 1009, Symeon was exiled to a village on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. Even there the cantankerous monk managed to get into disputes with the local peasants and he was still living outside Constantinople when he died in March 1022.<sup>22</sup>

Had that been all there was to Symeon’s life, then he certainly would never have been regarded as a saint. He was certainly not noted for

kindliness or works of charity. Indeed he rejected charity as a means of salvation and claimed that any kind of friendship or family ties were unsuitable for monks, whose only obedience should be to God, their spiritual mentor and the emperor, in that order. What marked him out were the ideas that he put forward about the role of monks as mystics. As a youth, he had been particularly struck by a passage in the mystical writer, John Klimakos, which talks of a vision of non-material light which shines beyond all fire. Inspired by Klimakos's work, Symeon urged constant prayer and contemplation which would lead to a vision of that light as a step towards the ultimate goal of 'deification' (*theosis*): a kind of sharing in the essence of God, through grace.<sup>23</sup> He himself experienced this vision of light, as his biographer records:

One night, as he was praying ... he saw a light coming from above, radiating its beams from heaven upon him: a pure and immense light illuminating everything, creating a brilliance equal to the light of day. He too was illumined by it, and it seemed to him that the entire building, including the cell which he inhabited, had disappeared, passing into nothingness in the twinkling of an eye. He found himself carried up into the air, completely forgetful of his body. In this state – as he told and wrote to his intimates – he was both filled with a great happiness and overcome with hot tears.<sup>24</sup>

Symeon's ideas were to prove immensely influential, especially after his biography was written by his disciple Niketas Stethatos (c. 1005–c. 1090), abbot of St John Stoudios. In 1052 Symeon's body was brought back to Constantinople and re-interred in the church of the monastery of St Mamas. His tomb became famous for its ability to heal the sick, a sure sign of sanctity. A home-grown saint was yet another addition to Constantinople's credentials for holiness.<sup>25</sup>

Greatly as the Byzantines admired monks, they had always considered that the highest spiritual calling was not that of living a communal life in a monastery but of the solitary hermit. Such individuals



were seen as particularly holy because they went far beyond the kind of renunciation of the world that was required for entry into a monastery. Many of them performed extraordinary feats of self-denial and even self-harm which were considered to be a mark of profound sanctity. St Theodore of Sykeon (d. 613), for example, prevailed upon a local blacksmith to build him an iron cage. In this the hermit would stand in all weathers, going without food for several days at a time and wearing a heavy corselet of iron which weighed over twenty kilograms (some fifty pounds). Such self-destructive asceticism was seen as praiseworthy because it was in essence a form of martyrdom, of laying down one's life for Christ. In subsequent generations there were many who followed Theodore of Sykeon's example, such as Theodore of Kolo-neia, patriarch of Antioch (970–6) who wore an iron corselet beneath a hair shirt.<sup>26</sup>

Even the trials of St Theodore of Sykeon, however, pale into insignificance compared to those of the hermits known as stylites. These rigorous ascetics lived out their lives not in monasteries but standing on the tops of the ancient columns that were to be found in Constantinople and all over the empire. They took their inspiration from St Symeon Stylites (c. 386–459), a Syrian monk who spent the last forty-seven years of his life standing on a pillar near Antioch. What moved Symeon to pursue this particular method of mortifying the flesh is not entirely clear, though it may have been a way of escaping from the crowds of people who came to seek his advice and prayers, such as his reputation for holiness. If so, he did not succeed, for on one occasion more than 1,000 visitors were counted at the foot of his column. His reputation was only enhanced by the hardships he endured, exposed to the elements day and night, summer and winter. Whatever spiritual benefit it may have conferred, the prolonged standing did not do him much physical good, a malignant ulcer developing on his left foot. He must have had an iron constitution, though, as he ultimately lived to over eighty. On the night he did finally die, his body had been in an upright position for so long that it remained like that and it took some time for his acolytes to realize next morning that the great man had passed away.<sup>27</sup>

Symeon's fame spread throughout the empire and it was not long before someone decided to follow his example in Constantinople. Daniel the Stylite (409–93) moved from Syria to the imperial capital and stood almost continuously for thirty-three years on a column at Anaplous on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. Daniel, however, faced an even greater challenge, as the climate of Constantinople was not nearly so amenable as that of Syria. On one occasion, the column very nearly blew down in a gale. During one particularly severe winter an icy wind blew down from the Black Sea with such violence that it ripped off the holy man's tunic and left him frozen stiff, his face 'hidden by ice as though it were covered by glass'. Fearing the worst, his team of disciples brought buckets of warm water with which to thaw him out. To their immense relief, Daniel opened his eyes and recounted the beautiful dreams that he had experienced. Thereafter the emperor insisted that a small shelter be erected on top of the column, overruling the hermit's protest that Symeon the Stylite had had no shelter.<sup>28</sup>

Stylites continued to be part of the Constantinopolitan scene in subsequent centuries. Luke the Stylite (c. 900–79), for example, stood for over forty years on the column of Eutropios in Chalcedon. On his death, another took his place but his vigil came to an abrupt end in 989 when a freak wave dashed the column to the ground and drowned him.<sup>29</sup> These ascetics continued to command the devotion of rich and poor alike. When faced with a dangerous rebellion in 1187, Emperor Isaac II Angelos summoned some stylites to the palace to pray for his survival. Maria Skleraina, mistress of Constantine IX, sent a gift of 700 gold pieces to a stylite named Lazaros (c. 996–1053), whose pillar was at Mount Galesion near Ephesus. Even the fishermen of Constantinople gave a tenth of their catch to Luke the Stylite in return for his blessing on their labours.<sup>30</sup>

Another peculiar Byzantine religious phenomenon was that of the holy fool. Perhaps as a conscious reaction to the celebrity status enjoyed by some stylites and hermits, this group sought to evade any admiration for their sanctity and hence any temptation to the sin of pride by behaving so outrageously as to attract only disgust and opprobrium. Their role model was Andrew *Salos* (the fool) who is thought to have died in about 474, although he may have been legendary and

never have existed at all. Originally from the area north of the Danube, Andrew was supposedly brought to Constantinople as a slave when he was a young boy. Although his master treated him kindly, Andrew yearned to be free and so pretended that he was mad. He was therefore locked up in the church of St Anastasia which acted as a kind of lunatic asylum. During the night, Andrew was visited in a dream by St Anastasia herself who encouraged him to continue in his madness. When it was clear that no cure was forthcoming, Andrew was released after four months.

The rest of Andrew's life was spent wandering the streets of Constantinople getting into all kinds of trouble, and the surviving record reads like an uproarious slapstick farce. On one occasion Andrew relieved himself behind a tavern, provoking its owner to rush out and rain blows on him while a passer-by, who was carrying a shepherd's crook, laid into him with that as well. The hapless Andrew staggered into the middle of the road and passed out, whereupon he was run over by an ox cart. By a miracle, he got up afterwards completely unhurt. There was, of course, method in Andrew's madness, calculated as it was to highlight the vanity of this passing world. Thus when Andrew went into one of the main squares of Constantinople and saw women selling jewellery he began shouting loudly 'Chaff and dust!' He had reckoned without a local wit, however, who quipped as he passed, 'If you have chaff to sell, take it to the Anemodoulion', meaning that the wind vane was the place where all the chaff would be blown away.<sup>31</sup> Fool though he was, however, Andrew was recognized as a saint. His prophecies were regarded as divinely inspired and were carefully recorded.<sup>32</sup>

With its myriad churches and monasteries, with its hermits and saints, therefore, Constantinople was able to present itself as a holy as well as a capital city. Those two roles, however, did not sit easily together and by 1200 there was a healthy scepticism among some of the population of Constantinople. A popular saying of the time ran 'A large church and little grace', suggesting that some people at least felt that the grandiose imperial foundations and those who serviced them did not necessarily provide a window onto the divine.<sup>33</sup> One problem was that many of Constantinople's churches and monasteries were

built and endowed by the emperor and so were intimately bound up with his wealth and power. Take, for example, one of the largest and most beautiful, the church and monastery of St George of Mangana. Its story is inseparable from that of its founder, the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–55).

Monomachos was not a Porphyrogenitos but a member of a noble Constantinopolitan family. He was lucky enough to possess both good looks and considerable wealth, but in one respect the former proved to be a disadvantage. During the 1030s Monomachos was a frequent visitor to the palace, where he charmed the empress Zoe with his conversation and wit. Zoe's second husband, Emperor Michael IV (1034–41), was less impressed and decided to rid himself of a potential threat to the throne which, after all, Michael only held by virtue of his marriage to Zoe. Constantine was arrested on a trumped-up charge and sentenced to exile on the Aegean island of Lesbos.<sup>34</sup>

Given the nature of Byzantine politics, one might consider Monomachos to have been lucky to escape murder or blinding. Yet to a noble Byzantine, exile from Constantinople was a fate very close to death. Well might Monomachos have uttered the words of another Byzantine noble who was forced to leave Constantinople on a diplomatic mission:

O thrice-happy city, eye of the universe, ornament of  
the world, star shining afar, beacon of this lower world,  
would that I were within you, enjoying you to the full!  
Do not part me from your maternal bosom!<sup>35</sup>

There was, however, one consolation for Monomachos in his dreary exile. He had been married twice but, after the death of his second wife, he was prevented from marrying again by Byzantine church law which did not permit a third marriage. He therefore took Maria Skleraina, the niece of his late wife, as a mistress, and the couple were, by all accounts, completely devoted to one another. So when Monomachos departed for Lesbos, Maria went too and used her money and possessions to ameliorate her lover's situation as much as possible.<sup>36</sup>

One day in the early summer of 1042, a messenger arrived from Constantinople with momentous news. Michael IV had died and his nephew and briefly reigning successor, Michael V (1041–2), had been overthrown in a popular uprising. The Empress Zoe and her sister Theodora were now in control of the Great Palace. With the news came a summons to return to Constantinople immediately. Zoe had decided that her old favourite was to become her husband, and when he reached the capital a splendid reception awaited him. A guard of honour was waiting to escort him on the final leg of his journey, and an ecstatic crowd cheered him as he rode up to the Brazen Gate of the Great Palace. The patriarch of Constantinople was soon prevailed upon to make an exception to the rule on third marriages in this particular case, and on 11 June 1042 Monomachos married Zoe and was crowned emperor as Constantine IX.<sup>37</sup>

After all his trials and tribulations, therefore, Constantine had finally arrived at the summit of power, the dark days of Lesbos left far behind. The moment is captured in a mosaic portrait of the imperial couple on the wall of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. Kneeling one on either side of a seated Christ, Constantine and Zoe both wear elaborate crowns and both have halos to denote the sanctity of the office they held. Some alteration is noticeable around the heads of the figures. It is possible that Constantine's head had been substituted for that of one of his predecessors in power, Romanos III or Michael IV.<sup>38</sup>

Many men in this situation would simply have forgotten about Maria Skleraina who had been left behind on Lesbos. After all, the need for her was past, and even to admit to her existence could jeopardize all that had been won. Not so Constantine, as his friend and biographer, Michael Psellos, recalled:

The emperor did not forget his beloved, even after his accession. With his physical eyes he beheld Zoe, but in his mind's eye was the image of his mistress; while he enfolded the empress in his arms, it was the other woman he clasped in the imagination of his heart.<sup>39</sup>

Against the urgent advice of his friends and relatives, Constantine decided to ask Zoe to recall Maria, presenting her simply as a victim of unjust punishment. Somewhat surprisingly, Zoe readily agreed. Maria was brought back to Constantinople and lodged in a modest house not far from the palace. There Constantine visited her secretly but it soon became clear that there was little need for concealment. The fact was that Zoe, now aged over sixty, considered herself much too old to be jealous. It was therefore agreed that Maria should be allowed to come and live inside the Great Palace. Nor was that all. Maria became, in effect, Constantine's second consort, taking part in official processions alongside the emperor and empress and being given a say in affairs of state. A special title was created for her, that of *Sebaste*.<sup>40</sup>

The cosy *ménage à trois* lasted for about two years. Then Maria fell ill, complaining of chest pains and difficulty in breathing. The doctors brought in by the emperor proved unable to help her and she died in 1044. Constantine was inconsolable and resolved to build for her a tomb that reflected the depths of his feeling for his lost love. The setting was to be the church of St George of Mangana which stood to the northern extremity of the precincts of the Great Palace and which was already renowned for possessing an important relic, the head of St George. Constantine had the existing building pulled down to make way for a magnificent new church, along with a complex of monastic buildings, including a hospital and a bath house, and extensive gardens. The cost was astronomical but the result spectacular:

Its every detail excited the greatest admiration. People marvelled at the size of the church, its beautiful symmetry, the harmony of its parts, the variety and rhythm of its loveliness, the streams of water, the encircling wall, the lawns covered with flowers, the dewy grass always sprinkled with moisture, the shade under the trees ... It was as if a pilgrimage had ended, and here was the vision perfect and unparalleled.<sup>41</sup>

Inside, Constantine's church was equally striking, as a Spanish envoy who visited it some three centuries later recorded:

### *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*

The main building of the church is very lofty, and it is everywhere adorned with mosaic work. There is seen here the figure of our Lord Jesus Christ as he appeared ascending into Heaven. The flooring of the church is a wonder of workmanship being flagged with slabs of porphyry and jasper in many colours, with scroll work very deftly accomplished.<sup>42</sup>

It was in this setting that Maria Skleraina was laid to rest. Zoe died in 1050, at an advanced age, and Constantine's last years were clouded by illness, as he suffered appallingly from gout. Michael Psellos recorded the ravages that it wrought on Constantine's once fine physique:

I myself saw his fingers, once so beautifully formed, completely altered from their natural shape, warped and twisted with hollows here and projections there, so that they were incapable of grasping anything at all. His feet were bent and his knees, crooked like the point of a man's elbow, were swollen, making it impossible for him to walk steadily or to stand upright for any length of time.<sup>43</sup>

He used often to go to the hospital attached to the church he had built, to seek relief.<sup>44</sup> Constantine died on 11 January 1055 and was buried in the church of St George of Mangana: not beside Zoe, who had made him emperor, but next to Maria Skleraina, the woman who had risked everything for him and for whom he had risked everything in return.

Thus it was that one of Constantinople's greatest and most famous churches had come into being not so much as a result of pious devotion but as a memorial to a relationship that the Church would have considered adulterous and immoral. Yet that was in many ways typical of the way things worked in Constantinople, because the Church and everyday life were so closely intertwined that the latter was bound to invade the former.

Inevitably, the Byzantine Church and its clergy, like the emperors, did not live up to the ideal. The senior ecclesiastic in Constantinople was the patriarch, an office that was held in 1200 by John X Kama-teros (1198–1206). He was certainly no saint. It was an open secret that he held his position largely because he was a close relative of the empress Euphrosyne. Yet John was by no means an unworthy patriarch and seems to have taken his duties seriously enough. His main failing seems to have been an inordinate fondness for doctrinal disputation. A year before he became patriarch he had caused a furore by using the occasion of a party at a friend's house loudly to advertise his opinions on the theology of the Eucharist and by accusing anyone who disagreed with him of heresy.<sup>45</sup>

There had been both better and worse patriarchs than John X in the past. The nadir must have been Theophylact (933–56) who was enthroned at the age of sixteen on the insistence of his father, Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos. Not surprisingly, the young patriarch did not always have his mind on the job, being much more interested in horse breeding. He was alleged to have possessed a stable of over 2,000 horses and on one occasion broke off a church service in Hagia Sophia halfway through on receiving news that his favourite mare was giving birth.<sup>46</sup> At the other end of the scale was the courageous and principled Nicholas Mystikos (901–7 and 912–25) who once dared to have the doors of Hagia Sophia closed in the face of Emperor Leo VI (886–912), in protest at the emperor's marrying for a fourth time.<sup>47</sup>

The patriarch of Constantinople, however, was not really expected to be a saint. The job was an administrative one and involved its incumbent in the mire of Byzantine politics too much for him to rise above the things of this world. It was to the monasteries and to the hermits that the Byzantines looked for holiness. Sadly they were often disappointed.

There was one great disadvantage of attempting to pursue a pure monastic life in a great capital city. The world and its politics had the habit of breaking in, not least because monasteries were regularly used as dumping grounds for the losers in the endless power games of the Byzantine court. In 1059, for example, the monastery of St John Stoudios received a novice in the person of Emperor Isaac I Komnenos.



Isaac had just abdicated in the face of vociferous opposition to his rule and took refuge in the monastic life and spent the remainder of his life in writing and contemplation. Michael VII Doukas ended up in the same place in the spring of 1078. The emperor who dethroned Michael VII, Nikephoros III Botaneiates, was himself toppled three years later, though at least his conqueror had the goodness to send him to a different monastery, that of the Virgin Peribleptos. When asked later whether he found the sudden change in lifestyle tolerable, Nikephoros replied that he could cope with it for the most part but that he found it difficult to do without eating meat.<sup>48</sup>

Monasteries in the area just outside Constantinople frequently received such political prisoners. In 944, Romanos I Lekapenos was sent to a monastery on Prote, one of the Princes' Islands in the Sea of Marmara, after having been ousted from the Great Palace by his rebellious sons Stephen and Constantine. He had the satisfaction the following year of being joined by his sons, who by then had themselves become the victims of yet another palace coup. The ex-emperor is said to have met the disconsolate pair at the door with withering sarcasm:

O happy hour that has compelled your majesties to visit my humble estate ... Here is boiled water for you, colder than the Gothic snows: here are soft beans, greenstuff and fresh cut leeks. There are no fishmongers' delicacies to cause illness; that is rather brought about by our frequent fasts. Our modest abode has no room for a large and extravagant company; but it is just large enough for your majesties who have refused to desert your father in his old age.<sup>49</sup>

The forcible insertion of political undesirables can hardly have been helpful to spiritual life in the monasteries. True, some of these enforced monks and nuns accepted their lot and even displayed some vocation for the monastic life. Romanos Lekapenos happily turned to hoeing the beans until his death in 948, and Michael VII went on to become bishop of Ephesus. Others, however, harboured hopes of returning to political life and in some cases they succeeded in doing

just that. Empress Euphrosyne, who was banished by her husband Alexios III to the convent of Nematarea at the Black Sea end of the Bosphorus in 1196, returned to Constantinople only six months later. Michael Psellos fell out of favour at court in about 1054 and took the monastic habit, a step he attributed 'partly to an innate desire which I had experienced from my earliest years ... and partly to the complete metamorphosis in political affairs.' No sooner had the emperor died, however, than he was back in the Great Palace and enjoying the favour of the new incumbent, the monastery having served its purpose as a temporary asylum.<sup>50</sup>

Even those who did stay put often made it clear that they had no intention of renouncing the things of this world. When Eirene, wife of Alexios I Komnenos, founded and endowed the convent of the Virgin Full of Grace (Kecharitomene), she made provision in the foundation charter that female members of her family should be allowed to join the community, perhaps as an asylum from any political reverses they might suffer. She was careful to stipulate, however, that:

if perhaps as a result of her customary very luxurious way of life, she were not able to change to one too harsh ... she will follow the diet and the singing of psalms as far as she is able in the cell that will be given to her ... together with its lavatory and the rest of the necessary attendance that goes with this room. She will live on her own and eat more food than the usual diet of the other nuns ... and she will be permitted to have also two free women or even slaves as her servants and they must be maintained by the convent.<sup>51</sup>

It would seem that Eirene's daughter, Anna Comnena, was later to take advantage of this opportunity when she fell into disgrace as a result of her opposition to her brother John II. She probably made little contribution to the spiritual life of the community, railing against the solitude and devoting herself to the study of the works of Aristotle and to writing a biography of her father. Only on her deathbed did she actually become a nun.<sup>52</sup>

It was not just that politics invaded monastic life in Constantinople: the world of the monastery also invaded politics. Believing, as did all Byzantines, in the efficacy of the prayers of saintly monks, many emperors brought them into the palace to act as spiritual advisers or took them with them on campaign to pray for the success of the venture.<sup>53</sup> Their position was much the same as that of Rasputin at the court of the last Russian tsar, and like Rasputin these palace monks soon attracted an unenviable reputation. After all, even the most saintly would have been hard put to maintain quite the same standards of self-denial on being catapulted from the austerity of a monastery into the sybaritic environment of the court. They were lampooned for their luxurious lifestyle, for gorging themselves at magnificent banquets and for making free with the imperial wine cellars.<sup>54</sup> More seriously, they were accused of giving dubious advice to the emperor on matters about which, with their limited experience, they knew nothing, and they were widely blamed for unpopular policies and failures. Isaac II Angelos was criticized for taking too much notice of the prophecies of the Stoudite monk, Dositheos, whom he appointed as patriarch of Constantinople. On the basis of Dositheos's prophecies, in 1189 Isaac adopted an aggressive stance towards the German emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, with disastrous consequences. The Germans easily overcame the Byzantine army that was sent against them, and Isaac had to make a humiliating climbdown. Michael Psellos accused the monks who advised the empress Theodora in 1055–6 of having 'brought ruin on the whole empire'.<sup>55</sup>

The problem was not confined to monks in the palace, for they were everywhere in Constantinople. Not only were there large numbers of them, thanks to the proliferation of monasteries, but Byzantine abbots were never as strict as those in the west about insisting that monks remain cloistered behind high walls. Monks could be found pushing and shoving in crowds, swearing in the market, riding on horses and having affairs with women.<sup>56</sup> The original idea of monasticism, that monks would give up the things of this world by fleeing from cities to desert places, seemed to have been lost. No wonder that by 1200 the most prestigious monasteries had become those which were situated far away from the capital, such as those on Mount Athos in Macedonia

or Mount St Auxentios in Asia Minor, remote from the temptations that abounded in Constantinople.

Disappointed in monks and monasteries, Byzantines in search of holiness might have turned to the individual hermits and holy men such as the stylites. The stylites of 1200, however, were not made of the same stern stuff as St Symeon Stylites, as one contemporary complained:

A few great Stylites are recorded among the saints of old, sky-climbers who reached heaven by using pillars for ladders. But this generation sprouts the Stylite kind like trees in a forest, and these are not trees of life or trees of knowledge but very mean little trees indeed ...<sup>57</sup>

The columns used by stylites now usually had shelters on top and stairways inside by which to ascend and descend.<sup>58</sup> It would seem that they could not resist making use of the latter to get involved with the latest political upheaval. This was all in good tradition. The first Constantinopolitan stylite, Daniel, had come down from his column in 475 to oppose the usurper Basiliscus, but his successors seem to have made a habit of it. When Isaac I Komnenos entered Constantinople in triumph in 1057, the stylites were among the crowd that thronged the streets to cheer him.<sup>59</sup> Clearly by 1200, the authority of hermits had greatly waned since the days of St Symeon Stylites: they had become just another aspect of the everyday world.

There were still holy fools on the model of Andrew Salos in Constantinople in 1200, but here too there was some wariness and scepticism as to their credentials for holiness. One nobleman gave this advice in dealing with those who pretended to be fools:

I recommend you to have pity on them and to be generous, but you should not play and laugh with them. This is no use. I have seen people laugh and play with such a person until they killed him with their pranks. No, you should neither outrage nor beat

a fool, whoever it is. Listen to him, whatever he says; do not despise him, he may be trying to outwit you with his folly.<sup>60</sup>

Such wariness no doubt stemmed from the fact that apparently extreme forms of asceticism were often a cloak for fraudulent extortion of money from gullible admirers. Hermits used to come into Constantinople from the countryside bearing baskets of fruit and vegetables to 'sell' in the streets. What they were really looking for was donations and they would persuade the pious but credulous to part with two or three gold coins for a single apple or pear. Others dealt in relics, such as the monk Andrew, whose offerings included no less than ten hands of St Prokopios, fifteen jaws of St Theodore, eight legs of St Nestor, twelve arms of St Demetrius and even the beards of the babies killed in the Massacre of the Innocents.<sup>61</sup> Then there were those who faked their ascetic sufferings. One individual was reported to have walked around Constantinople wearing, in imitation of Theodore of Sykeon, an iron harness that apparently bit into his flesh and caused him to bleed profusely. Naturally such mortification of the flesh attracted a horde of admirers who showered gifts on the holy man. It turned out, however, that this particular hermit was not suffering at all, for he had simulated the bleeding by smearing himself with ox liver beforehand.

It was incidents like this which prompted the scholar and teacher John Tzetzes to write sarcastically to his former servant, Demetrius Gobinos. Gobinos had run away to the nearby city of Philippopolis in Thrace to start a new life as a sausage maker, but Tzetzes scornfully advised him to return to Constantinople since he would be able to make a much better living there:

For now, every disgusting and thrice-accursed wretch like you has only to put on a monastic habit, or hang bells from his penis or wrap fetters or chains round his feet, or a rope or chain round his neck – in short to dress himself up to look self-effacing in an ostentatious and highly theatrical way, and put on an artificial and highly calculated air of artless sim-

plicity. Immediately the city of Constantine showers him with honours, and the rogue is publicly feted as a saint above the Apostles, above the martyrs, and above whatever is pleasing to God. Why describe in detail the sweetmeats and delicacies and titbits, the bags of money and the privileges with which the city regales this monster? Leading ladies, and not a few men, of the highest birth, consider it a great thing to fit out their private chapels, not with icons of saintly men by the hand of some first-rate artist, but with the leg irons and fetters and chains of these accursed villains, which they obtain from them after much supplication, and then replace with others.<sup>62</sup>

Harsh words indeed, and a good indication that the Byzantines were not as blinkered to reality by their own myth-making as might at first be thought.

## CHAPTER 6

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# *‘Two Thirds of the Wealth of this World’*

Conspicuous prosperity was very much part of the Byzantine myth. Visitors to Constantinople were regularly informed by their hosts that the city was the richest in the world and that just as its inhabitants surpassed other people in wisdom, so they excelled them in wealth.<sup>1</sup> While some may have resented the arrogance with which this was no doubt stated, the evidence was undeniable. Foreigners were astonished by the opulence that they saw around them in Constantinople, especially the abundance of precious metals, jewels and silk.<sup>2</sup> The availability of such moveable wealth played an important part in Byzantine diplomacy, gold coins and costly silk garments being routinely lavished on kings, rulers and dignitaries on whom the Byzantines wanted to make an impression. Yet while the wealth of Constantinople was undeniable, what was much less apparent was where it all came from. The Byzantine attitude seems to have been that riches were simply a corollary of Constantinople's importance and holiness, something only to be expected in a city so favoured by God. There was, of course, rather more to the question than that, and a number of more down-to-earth factors seem to have lain behind the prosperity of medieval Constantinople: good organization inherited from the past, geography, wide circulation of money and, above all, trade.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Constantinople is not so much that it flourished but that it survived at all. By medieval standards it was a huge city, with something around 375,000 inhabitants in 1200.<sup>3</sup> No other city in the Christian world could match it in size, but

Constantinople consequently faced a severe challenge in finding the means of feeding and watering its population. The immediate resources for doing so were not plentiful. Constantinople had only one natural source of fresh water, the small River Lykos, which entered the city by passing under the Land Walls between the Gate of St Romanos and the Gate of Adrianople. It was hardly adequate to supply all the inhabitants of such a large centre of population, and besides it tended to dry up for six months of the year. When it came to food supplies and particularly to the all-important staple, bread, up to the mid-seventh century the Byzantine emperors had been able to rely on imported corn from the province of Egypt. In 642, however, Egypt was lost to the Arabs and with it Constantinople's main source of grain. In the dark days of the later seventh century, therefore, it was probably more likely that the Byzantine capital would have been brought to its knees by starvation, rather than being taken by storm.

That the city survived was partly due to the superb infrastructure which it had inherited from the emperors of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. In response to the rapid growth of Constantinople's population, they had taken steps to secure the water supply by creating a network of aqueducts to carry water in from the streams and rivers of Thrace. In 368, for example, Emperor Valens (364–78) had ordered the restoration and enlargement of an aqueduct which entered through subterranean pipes near the Gate of Adrianople and then marched majestically over the rooftops to deliver water to a reservoir near the Forum of Theodosius.<sup>4</sup> Aware that this source could easily dry up during a drought or be physically cut during a siege, as indeed the Aqueduct of Valens was by the Avars in 626, the emperors also constructed a series of underground cisterns beneath the streets, their vaulted roofs supported by hundreds of columns to store the precious water for when it was most needed. One was the Basilika cistern, built by Justinian close to Hagia Sophia, a masterpiece of architecture covering some 9,800 square metres. Another, the cistern of Aspar, built in 459, was large enough to contain a modern football pitch.<sup>5</sup> Later emperors were careful to keep the aqueducts and cisterns in good repair as they knew that the survival of the city depended on them.<sup>6</sup>



As far as the grain supply was concerned, with the loss of Egypt the rulers of Byzantium sought out new sources of supply. All of Constantinople's hinterland of Thrace, Bulgaria, the Crimea and the lands around the Aegean was tapped and its produce shipped to the capital.<sup>7</sup> As in the case of water, the emperors knew the importance of ensuring that the capital was well supplied with bread, and they exempted bakers from all public service so as to ensure that nothing interrupted their vital work. They also stockpiled corn in special depots whenever an enemy army looked likely to mount a siege.<sup>8</sup>

Getting it wrong could be dangerous. In the late 1070s, the food supplies came under severe pressure as refugees flooded into Constantinople from Asia Minor which was rapidly being overrun by the Seljuk Turks. The chief minister, Nikephoritzes, attempted to stave off the crisis by extending state control over the corn trade, stockpiling grain in the Thracian port of Rhaidestos on the Sea of Marmara. The policy backfired when farmers proved unwilling to sell to the government at the fixed price it was offering and the shortages in Constantinople worsened. An open revolt broke out in Thrace in 1077 and the hated warehouses were burned to the ground. Nikephoritzes perished in a coup d'état the following year.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, Constantinople was not entirely dependent on corn and other foodstuffs brought in from Thrace or further afield. There were other sources of food closer to hand, notably an abundance of fish. Entire shoals of mackerel, bonito and tuna were brought to its very walls by the same currents that made Constantinople so difficult to attack by sea.<sup>10</sup> A large fishing fleet of over 1,000 boats was ready at all times to intercept the shoals as they migrated south from the Black Sea in winter and back north again in summer, and the fish could also be caught in fixed nets into which the current would obligingly sweep them. The owners of the boats and nets were obliged by law to land their catch on piers and beaches by the city walls and to sell directly to fishmongers who in turn sold the fish to the public at one of several markets. The price was fixed by the authorities, and the fishmongers were forbidden to sell their wares to outsiders for conveyance beyond the city walls. Only if there was a surplus which might otherwise go bad was any export permitted. The needs of the city came before all other considerations.<sup>11</sup>

Meat was provided by livestock that was driven into Constantinople from the surrounding area and marketed to butchers and pork merchants in the Forum of Theodosius.<sup>12</sup> Fruit and vegetables could be brought in from outside or grown inside the city itself. The area closest to the Land Walls was by no means entirely covered in buildings and was largely given over to orchards and market gardens. Once harvested, the crops could be preserved in hot weather by hanging them in baskets suspended over the cool waters of the underground cisterns until they were needed.<sup>13</sup>

Wine was imported into Constantinople in vast quantities, for it was by no means a drink reserved for the rich and was sold at officially fixed prices in taverns throughout the city. Innkeepers were obliged by law to serve full measure in vessels bearing the regulation stamp or risk having their hair and beard shaved off and being expelled from the innkeepers' guild. They were also supposed to close their premises at eight o'clock in the evening because

if, in fact, the frequenters of these inns had a right of access thereto at night time after spending the day there, it might end that, under the influence of drink, they would be able to indulge in violence and rioting with impunity.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of this prohibition, disdainful observers from among the palace bureaucrats were quick to blame any disturbance on the effects of over-indulgence by the masses.<sup>15</sup>

Not that the courtiers or clergy themselves were averse to a good vintage. Surviving letters contain long passages praising or excoriating the wines of different regions. Michael Choniates, bishop of Athens from 1182 to 1204, poured scorn on the rough Retsina that was all he could get in his see and longed for the delicate wines of Euboea, Chios and Rhodes.<sup>16</sup> Among the courtiers, drinking sessions at the palace could be testing occasions and the ability to hold one's drink was an essential skill for the ambitious. Michael Psellos discerned this quality in John the Orphanotrophos, chief minister to Michael IV (1034–41):

It has often been a cause of surprise to me, when I have sat with him at banquets, to observe how a man, a slave to drink and given to ribaldry as he was, could bear the burden of power. In his cups he would carefully watch how each of his fellows behaved. Afterwards, as if he had caught them red-handed, he would submit them to questioning and examine what they had said and done in their drunken moments. They came to fear him more, therefore, when he was tipsy than when he was sober.<sup>17</sup>

In general, therefore, apart from brief crises such as that of the 1070s, Constantinople remained not only sufficiently well fed and watered but well enough supplied with luxury items such as wine to provide a cup for a workman in his local tavern and to satisfy the appetites of the likes of John the Orphanotrophos. All in all, it was a wonder of organization in a world where subsistence farming was the norm.

Just to say that Constantinople succeeded in feeding itself, however, does not explain its extraordinary prosperity or why it thrived to the extent that it was a source of wonder and envy to neighbouring peoples. Part of the answer lies in another important factor in Constantinople's economic life which set it apart from much of the rest of the world. The Byzantine empire had the mechanism for being wealthy, that is to say it boasted a money economy where coins of all values circulated freely.

As in all medieval societies, copper coins were used in twelfth-century Constantinople for everyday transactions such as the purchase of food. One would buy ten or eleven mackerel, depending on the honesty of the vendor, while two would purchase a meal of soup and greens from a street vendor in Blachernae.<sup>18</sup> What marked Byzantium out from western Europe in particular, however, was the wide circulation of higher value coins, especially gold. This was another area in which the Byzantines were genuinely indebted to Constantine the Great. He had introduced a new gold coin, the *solidus* or *nomisma*, which became the standard means of exchange not only in Byzantium but in the entire Mediterranean world. By 1200, the *nomisma* had been replaced by the

*hyperpyron* (plural: *hyperpyra*) which contained 20.5 carats and had been introduced by Alexios I in 1092, along with lesser denominations in electrum, billon and copper.<sup>19</sup>

Part of the reason for the wide circulation of these gold coins was taxation. In the Byzantine provinces, households without land paid a hearth tax, while those with land paid a combined hearth and land tax, all rendered in gold or silver, although the emperor also levied various exactions payable in kind, usually food and wine.<sup>20</sup> This was something that distinguished the Byzantine emperor from his counterparts elsewhere in the Christian world. In France, for example, the king drew not money from his subjects but feudal services and payments in kind. Attempts to impose a money tax in France, the 'Saladin tithe' of 1188, proved a failure because it was impossible to collect the payments in the face of entrenched opposition.<sup>21</sup> In Byzantium, the absolute position of the emperor meant that there was never any question of his right to tax his subjects.

It was not that taxes were any more popular in Constantinople than they have ever been anywhere else. Niketas Choniates no doubt voiced a widespread opinion in his unflattering description of the hard-hearted tax collector, John of Poutze:

He was by nature more inexorable and relentless than any man. It would have been easier to make a stone smile or laugh than to change his mind against his wishes. Even more remarkable than this, not only was he unmoved by tears, unbending before the pleas of supplicants, impervious to the lure of silver and unaffected by the enchantments of gold, but he was also inhumanly unapproachable. That which was distressing and insufferable to the men of those days was the fact that there was no clear response forthcoming from him to a petitioner's request, but he took great satisfaction in remaining silent; sometimes he would dismiss a supplicant without ever speaking to him.<sup>22</sup>

Unpopular and burdensome as taxes must have been, however, the necessity of paying them did ensure that everyone handled money and that high value coins like the *hyperpyron* must have circulated freely and were by no means only ever seen by the wealthy. Fishermen, for example, were allegedly able to pay one *hyperpyron* every fourteen days to the government as a tax on their boat and its catch.<sup>23</sup> That, and the large number of Byzantine coins which have survived from this period, suggests that a significant proportion of the population had money and so would have been able to use it as an everyday means of exchange and as a means of storing wealth.

For the Byzantine empire did have a banking system, provided by the money changers, whose stalls could be seen lining the Mese and the great squares. They would exchange gold coins for the silver and bronze ones that were needed for every day expenses, or take the silver and bronze accumulated by the shopkeepers in exchange for gold so that taxes could be paid. They also exchanged the coins brought by foreign visitors for Byzantine ones.<sup>24</sup> Although strictly regulated, it was a lucrative trade. One of the money changers, Kalomodios, was so wealthy that he attracted the notice of Emperor Alexios III who had him arrested on a trumped-up charge in the hope of relieving him of his money. Yet wealthy though Kalomodios was, he was not, apparently, unpopular. When news of his arrest spread, a crowd of his supporters invaded Hagia Sophia and threatened to do violence to the patriarch unless he interceded for the money changer. Knowing the power of the Constantinopolitan mob, Alexios III wisely backed down and Kalomodios was released unharmed.<sup>25</sup> Such spontaneous popular support for Kalomodios is suggestive. He and other money changers and bankers may well have been appreciated for the service that they provided, possibly enabling even those of relatively modest means to store what money they made in good times as a reserve against times of dearth, although specific evidence for this is lacking.

The existence of a money economy and taxation, however, were symptoms of Constantinople's wealth, rather than causes of it. There had to be other factors to ensure that money circulated widely. It is tempting to take a modern view and to assume that the Byzantines must have

grown rich by making something and selling it. There is some evidence to support that view, for twelfth-century Constantinople was a centre of production. Its main products were expensive luxury goods such as soap, perfume, candles and, above all, work in precious metal and garments of silk.<sup>26</sup>

Yet although Constantinople produced luxury goods, that was not the source of its wealth. The fact was that the prevailing ideology meant that the Byzantines were not prepared to sell their wares to whoever produced the purchase price. To take the example of the silk industry, its manufacture and sale was a tightly controlled imperial monopoly. The export of raw silk was forbidden and that of finished goods was strictly regulated. Certain types of silk garment were simply not for sale. Foremost among them were the cloaks of deep purple whose colour came from the shells of the rare *Murex* mollusc, found in the waters off the Peloponnese and nearby islands. Since it took up to 12,000 shells to dye just one garment, such silks were astronomically expensive and were reserved for the use of the emperor alone. For anyone else to don such finery was tantamount to declaring their candidature for the throne and was therefore high treason. Private citizens were forbidden to manufacture purple cloth. Only officially licensed guilds had that privilege.

The restrictions did not stop there. The Byzantine authorities had drawn up a long list of types of finished garment that were reserved either for certain classes of society or for the Byzantines alone, with their export strictly forbidden. Anyone found selling them to foreigners was liable to be flogged and to have their hair shaved off. As with everything else in Byzantium, the origin of this prohibition was traced back to Constantine the Great. He had been visited, as he so frequently was, by an angel who had presented him with these particular vestments but had warned him that they should never be given to non-Romans.<sup>27</sup>

Behind the legend, there was a clear objective to the policy: to maintain the rarity of silk garments in neighbouring countries and thereby retain exclusive possession of a potent symbol of authority and power. That objective emerges from an incident that took place in 968. Bishop Liudprand of Cremona, the envoy of the German emperor Otto I, was about to leave Constantinople when some Byzantine officials

demanded that he produce any silk garments that he had purchased during his stay:

Those that are fit for you shall be marked with a leaden seal and left in your possession; those which are prohibited to all nations, except to us Romans, shall be taken away and their price returned ... As we surpass all other nations in wealth and wisdom, so it is right that we should surpass them in dress. Those who are unique in the grace of their virtue should also be unique in the virtue of their raiment.<sup>28</sup>

The rule was not completely inflexible. The harassment of Liudprand was no doubt partly motivated by annoyance at his master's attacks on Byzantine territories in Italy. He had been allowed to take out similar items on another visit to Constantinople some twenty years earlier. Other visitors to whom there was no particular objection were treated more leniently. William of Mandeville, earl of Essex who passed through Constantinople in the autumn of 1176 on his way back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, took away with him a number of silk cloths which he distributed among local churches when he got home. Bishop Gunther of Bamberg, who visited in 1065, seems to have acquired during his stay a fine silk tapestry depicting a mounted emperor.<sup>29</sup> One gets the impression, however, that the Byzantines viewed such transactions as a favour bestowed rather than as a straightforward commercial sale.

These are not the actions of a society that lived by making goods and exporting them. There were, of course, Byzantine merchants who travelled overseas to trade, particularly to Egypt. A party of them sailed to Alexandria in 1192 and returned with goods to the value of 39,000 *hyperpyra*.<sup>30</sup> Commercial enterprise was not, however, greatly valued in a city where service at court was regarded as the highest calling. Niketas Choniates looked disdainfully on his fellow bureaucrat Constantine Mesopotamites because of his 'aptitude for trade and his insatiable gathering in of unjust gain'. Emperor Theophilos (829–42) was horrified when he discovered that his wife had been making money by shipping goods. He ordered that both ship and cargo be

burned, an action that earned him high praise from an otherwise hostile chronicler.<sup>31</sup> One suspects too that the Byzantines might not have been very good at commerce. A Jewish merchant was scathing about the lack of commercial acumen among some of his Byzantine counterparts that he encountered in Cairo because 'they do not distinguish between first-class and inferior goods; for every quality they pay the same price!'<sup>32</sup>

There was another factor that diverted the energies of the Byzantines away from commerce: the reluctance most of them felt to travel beyond the walls of the Queen of Cities. The lands beyond, even the provinces of the Byzantine empire, they regarded as hostile and barbaric. Most intimidating of all was that fearsome and uncertain element, the sea. The dangers were, of course, very real. During the 1030s, a Byzantine merchant ship on its way back from Syria was sent crashing onto the rocky coast of Asia Minor when the shank of its anchor sheared off, and it went down with its entire cargo of glass. Even a short voyage across the Sea of Marmara, like that taken by Alexios III and his retinue in late 1200, could suddenly become fraught with peril:

At this time, a violent storm blew up suddenly, swelling the waves. The ship was lifted upright, bow over stern, and all but sank as water poured in from both sides. The sailors, thrown into confusion, dripped with sweat, and the passengers shouted for help and invoked God, and there was the sound of wailing and piercing screams.

The ship succeeded in taking shelter behind one of the Princes' Islands and then in reaching Chalcedon. From there it made the crossing to the Boukoleon harbour of the Great Palace, those on board 'recovering from their vertigo and spitting out the brine'.<sup>33</sup>

While anyone who ventured forth on the sea in frail wooden ships had to face these dangers, the Byzantines seem to have been particularly aware of them. Their literature abounds with sea metaphors. The emperor, for example, was always being likened to a helmsman, guiding his ship through the tempestuous swell, facing seas of troubles and



waves of enemies. Such images reflected only too well the wariness and apprehension with which the Byzantines viewed the surrounding waters, as well as the reluctance they felt in venturing forth from the centre of sophistication and civilization that was their capital city.<sup>34</sup> Commercial enterprise on the high seas was not for them.

So the problem of Constantinople's wealth remains. Yet although the Byzantines were not a commercial people, the ultimate source of Constantinople's wealth did lie in trade. The difference was that it was a trade that was carried on by others. Once again, Constantinople's great advantage was its geographical position. Situated at the crossing point between Europe and Asia, it was an obvious entrepôt where goods from one part of the world could be exchanged for those of another. In the words of a contemporary:

All sorts of merchants come here from the land of Babylon, from the land of Shinar, from Persia, Media, and all the sovereignty of the land of Egypt, from the land of Canaan, and from the empire of Russia, from Hungaria, Patzinakia, Khazaria, and the land of Lombardy and Sepharad. It is a busy city, and merchants come to it from every country by sea or land, and there is none like it in the world except Baghdad, the great city of Islam.<sup>35</sup>

These merchants gathered in the commercial sector, along the Golden Horn, the place where ships could safely be moored. Arab, Turkish and, occasionally, Jewish traders brought spices, perfume, carpets, porcelain and jewels, as well as glassware.<sup>36</sup> Italians, from the mercantile cities of Amalfi, Ancona, Genoa, Pisa and Venice, brought timber, gold and wool.<sup>37</sup> Russians, who had journeyed down the River Dnieper and across the Black Sea, brought wax, honey, amber, swords and fur, and the Bulgarians came laden with linen and honey.<sup>38</sup> These products were then sold at various markets throughout the city. Perfume, for example, was marketed from stalls that were set up in the Augousteion between the Milion and the Brazen Gate of the Great Palace.<sup>39</sup>

Having disposed of their goods, the merchants could then load up their ships with products that were in high demand in their home countries, both those brought by other foreign merchants and those produced in Constantinople itself. Silk garments were a favourite export for the Italians, who sold what they brought back from the east at two annual fairs in Pavia.<sup>40</sup> The rarity value placed on such products in western Europe, where there was little or no silk industry before the twelfth century, can be gauged from the fact that they were often used to adorn the tombs of major saints and rulers. When the grave of St Cuthbert (d. 687) in Durham Cathedral was opened in May 1827, the skeleton was found to be wrapped in silk vestments. Embroidered with designs of fish, birds and fruit, they are believed to be of Byzantine manufacture, placed in the coffin in homage to one of England's greatest saints. Similar precious Byzantine silks were acquired for the burial places of St Dunstan at Canterbury and St Siviard at Sens, and that of the great Frankish emperor, Charlemagne (768–814) at Aachen.<sup>41</sup> Byzantine silks were also highly prized in the Islamic world, which did have a silk industry of its own, suggesting not only that they were of premium quality and craftsmanship but perhaps also that the export restrictions imposed by the Byzantines had the effect of driving the price up.<sup>42</sup>

Silk was by no means the only commodity brought back by Italian merchants from Constantinople. It was presumably in a Venetian ship that the golden altarpiece known as the Pala d'Oro in St Mark's church reached Venice in around 1105. Manufactured in Constantinople, it is one of the supreme examples of the craft of Byzantine goldsmiths. The bronze doors of Constantinopolitan manufacture which are to be found in Rome, Amalfi, Trani and Salerno presumably arrived in the same way. Italian merchants were, however, happy to buy up all kinds of goods for export, even on one occasion a stolen icon.<sup>43</sup>

Given that most of this trade was conducted by foreign merchants, it might be asked how the Byzantines themselves benefited from it. They did benefit from it, and benefited very greatly. The principal way of doing so was by charging a customs duty, known as the *Kommerkion*. Unlike a modern government, the Byzantine authorities had no interest in using taxation to discourage imports and encourage exports. The

*Kommerkion* was levied at the rate of 10 per cent on all goods coming into or going out of the city and on all transactions in between.<sup>44</sup> So lucrative was the Constantinople trade that merchants could still turn a profit, in spite of such a prohibitive level of duty.

The *Kommerkion*, along with the taxation of their own subjects, was a major source of the fantastic wealth of the Byzantine emperors. It was not the only one. Basil II (976–1025), for example, is reputed to have built up a surplus of 200,000 gold pieces in the imperial treasury from the booty brought back from his successful wars against the Arabs and Bulgars.<sup>45</sup> Unlike conquest, however, the *Kommerkion* was regular and dependable and its proceeds must have lain behind much of the ostentatious display for which Constantinople was famous. It probably funded the generous diplomatic gifts such as the purses full of gold and silver coins handed to Sigurd of Norway and his companions, and the lavish rebuilding and redecorating of Constantinople's churches and palaces. It also promoted a kind of trickle-down effect. Some of the proceeds were passed on to the courtiers and aristocrats whom the emperors invested with grandiose titles such as *Protospatharios* and *Kouropalaios*. With the title came a generous yearly stipend, payable in gold during Holy Week.<sup>46</sup> The courtiers and aristocrats in their turn provided the market for Constantinople's industries producing luxury goods, to clothe their persons in silk and adorn their houses in mosaic. Finally, the rest of the population, from money changers to innkeepers, benefited both from the presence of affluent customers and from the influx of merchants as providing a ready market for their wares. There was no need to leave the great city and brave the cruel and unpredictable sea. The Byzantines could just wait at home for others to come to them.

These were the hard commercial facts that made Constantinople the wealthiest city in Christendom. Profiting from trade in this way was not just a matter of sitting back and collecting the *Kommerkion*, however. So lucrative was Constantinople's commerce that it could lead to conflict since foreign powers were often tempted to use military muscle to improve the position of their merchants. Among the first to do so were the Russians. In 907, according to one account,

the prince of Kiev, Oleg, sailed down the Bosphorus with a powerful fleet, destroying churches, monasteries and suburban settlements as he went. Taken by surprise, the Byzantines came to terms and on 2 September 911 concluded a commercial treaty with the Russians. In view of the success of the Russian fleet, the Byzantines were compelled to offer extremely generous terms. Russian merchants were exempted from paying the *Kommerkion* and were allotted a special lodging place in the suburban quarter of St Mamas, situated on the European shore of the Bosphorus to the north of the Golden Horn. There they were to be supplied with six months' free lodging and, the treaty stipulated, baths whenever they wanted them. The wariness with which the Byzantines viewed their trading partners is reflected in another clause. The Russians were not permitted to enter Constantinople itself, except by one gate only, unarmed, and never in groups of more than fifty at a time, accompanied by an imperial officer.<sup>47</sup>

The 911 treaty gave the Russians far-reaching privileges that no other foreign merchant group enjoyed, but the Byzantines had no intention of letting it remain the last word on the matter. In 941, when the Russians attacked Constantinople again, they were met by a Byzantine fleet armed with Greek fire and their ships were virtually annihilated. In the aftermath, a new treaty was concluded in 944 that restored the status quo. The exemption from the *Kommerkion* was withdrawn and the Russians were specifically forbidden to buy silk fabrics that cost more than fifty gold pieces.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Russians were not excluded altogether, in spite of their misdemeanours, for the Byzantines were only too well aware of how much they profited from the presence of foreign merchants on the Golden Horn. Another treaty made in 971 specifically provided that Russians who journeyed to Constantinople to trade should be regarded as friends, and at the end of the twelfth century they still had distinct presence in Constantinople, in an area close to the church of the Forty Martyrs.<sup>49</sup>

Conflict could also arise as a result of aggression from the Byzantine side, especially when the emperors tried to squeeze more profit out of Constantinople's trade than was brought in by the *Kommerkion*. When the Byzantine authorities tried to change the terms on which the Bulgars traded in Constantinople in 894 they sparked off a war

which lasted for thirty-four years. In 1200, Alexios III hit on a novel way of supplementing his income. He dispatched a fleet of six ships commanded by Constantine Phrangopoulos to the Black Sea, ostensibly to salvage a shipwreck. Phrangopoulos was, in fact, a pirate who cruised the Black Sea and preyed on merchant shipping on its way to and from Constantinople. Both Byzantine and Turkish merchants fell victim to his attacks and once they got back to Constantinople they appealed to Alexios for redress. By this time, however, the emperor had already sold his cut of the loot from their vessels, so the Turkish merchants went to Konya and appealed to the Seljuk sultan, Rukn al-Din. Faced with the threat of war, Alexios backed down, distanced himself from Phrangopoulos's depredations and compensated the Turkish merchants.<sup>50</sup>

In spite of such conflicts, Constantinople's trade continued to flourish and by 1200 the most important group of foreign merchants was neither the Russians nor the Turks, but those from the Italian city states. They had been trading with Constantinople for centuries, making annual voyages there to sell their cargoes and then loading up with the products of the east. As the years went by they had gradually been able to improve their position and extract important concessions from the emperor, initially not by making war on him but by allying themselves with him. The first to do so were the Amalfitans who seem to have been accorded a privileged status for supporting the Byzantines in southern Italy. By the mid-tenth century they had their own commercial quarter, not in a suburban outpost as the Russians had had, but a stretch of land along the southern bank of the Golden Horn inside the walls of Constantinople. Within the quarter were shops, houses, bakeries, churches, warehouses and landing stages all for the exclusive use of this group of merchants.<sup>51</sup> Some decades later, the Venetians too were able to improve their position by negotiating a treaty in 992 that reduced the toll they had to pay when their ships entered the Dardanelles at Abydos, profiting perhaps by their reputation for loyalty to the Byzantine cause in Italy or from the need of the Byzantines for allies in their long struggle with the Bulgars.<sup>52</sup>

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, these modest gains were greatly extended, especially in the case of the Venetians, who were

able to improve their trading position by doing the Byzantines a great service. In 1081, Robert Guiscard, Norman duke of southern Italy, had launched an attack across the Adriatic against the Byzantine provinces in the Balkans and had inflicted a serious reverse on the imperial army at the battle of Dyrrachion. Desperate to stop the victorious Normans from marching on to Thessalonica and Constantinople, the Byzantine emperor, Alexios I Komnenos, sought an ally who would close the Adriatic to Norman ships and so prevent reinforcements from reaching his adversary. Venice was the obvious choice, situated as it was at the top of the Adriatic and having a strong fleet at its disposal. The Venetians were happy to help, as they probably had no desire to see both sides of the Adriatic in Norman hands. Although their fleet was badly mauled by the Normans off Corfu in the spring of 1084, they played a significant part in the campaign as Alexios first wore down the Norman army and then expelled it from the Balkans altogether.

In seeking to draw the Venetians into the conflict, Alexios had promised that 'all their desires would be satisfied'. Once the war was over, he proved as good as his word and issued a *chrysobull*, an imperial document with a gold seal, in their favour, granting them far-reaching concessions in the maritime trade with Constantinople. They were given the right to trade in nearly all ports of the empire, including the capital, free of the *Kommerkion* and other dues. They were also granted their own commercial quarter, known as the Embolo, close to that occupied by the Amalfitans in the district of Perama alongside the Golden Horn. By the mid-twelfth century, the Venetian Embolo was the largest of the Italian commercial quarters, measuring approximately half a kilometre in length and containing three landing stages and four churches where services were conducted in Latin, rather than Greek. There were also shops, taverns, warehouses and mills.<sup>53</sup>

Some years later, the needs of foreign policy dictated that similar concessions should be made to other Italian city states. In 1111 a treaty was made with Pisa, giving a reduction in the *Kommerkion* from 10 to 4 per cent, and a commercial quarter and a landing stage on the Golden Horn, concessions that may have been a response to an attempt by a Pisan fleet to force its way through the Dardanelles. In 1155, Manuel I Komnenos, needing support for his ambitious plans to destabilize the

Norman position in Italy, negotiated a similar agreement with Genoa, which received the same reduction in the *Kommerkion* along with a commercial compound and a wharf. Like that granted to the Pisans, it lay to the east of the Venetian Embolo, closer to the entrance to the Golden Horn.<sup>54</sup>

These treaties left the Italians and, particularly the Venetians, pre-eminent players in Constantinople's trade and enabled them to dominate the flow of goods in a triangle between the Byzantine capital, western Europe and Egypt. Spices, particularly pepper, cinnamon and saffron, almonds, raisins and cochineal, were shipped out of the empire while timber, iron, copper and textiles were brought in.<sup>55</sup>

It might be thought that for so much of the empire's trade to have been in the hands of foreigners who were not paying the full *Kommerkion* could hardly have been beneficial in the long run, since the Byzantine emperors had granted away one of their major sources of income. The loss was probably not as drastic as it might at first sound. The Byzantine government took care to recoup any shortfall by making sure that the full *Kommerkion* was charged on any Byzantines or foreigners who traded with the Venetians in Constantinople. Moreover, it would seem that some of the more generous provisions of these treaties were not always implemented in practice.<sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Byzantine government regarded all these concessions as temporary measures, which could be withdrawn once the empire was in a stronger position and no longer had any need of these Italian allies, in much the same way as the treaty with the Russians had been renegotiated from a position of strength. The moment seemed to have arrived when John II Komnenos succeeded Alexios I in 1118. The Venetians, who had the most far-reaching privileges, were the obvious target and so when a Venetian embassy arrived to request a renewal of the treaty of 1082, John refused outright. Venice, however, was not prepared to sit back and accept the loss of its privileged status and showed itself as ready to resort to force as the Russians had. In August 1122, a fleet of more than 100 ships set out down the Adriatic, attacking the Byzantine island of Corfu on the way. After spending some time off the Syrian coast fighting the Egyptian navy, the fleet returned to Byzantine waters in 1125, rav-

aging the islands of Rhodes, Chios, Kos, Lesbos, Samos and Andros before sailing back to Venice. Clearly, the Venetians were a power to be reckoned with, and John II, in the face of this display of naval might, had no option but to give way and to restore the original commercial privileges in a treaty of 1126.<sup>57</sup>

Another attempt to rein in Venetian privileges was made in March 1171, when Manuel I Komnenos secretly brought troops into Constantinople and suddenly ordered the arrest of all Venetians in the city and the confiscation of their goods. The same fate was visited on those Venetians in provincial towns, it having been arranged beforehand that the authorities there were to strike simultaneously so that no warning arrived from elsewhere. In the small port of Almyros, however, the coup was bungled and some twenty ships which had been in the harbour were able to escape the net. Sailing back to their own city, they raised the alarm, prompting a near-riot as the people of Venice clamoured for revenge. A fleet of 140 vessels was hastily constructed in less than four months and set out for Constantinople. This time, however, the Byzantines were lucky. The Venetians reached as far as the island of Chios, but while they were there plague broke out on board their ships. Over 1,000 people died within the first few days of the epidemic and attempts to shake it off by sailing from island to island were unsuccessful. The Venetians had no option but to turn back. Manuel I's gamble had paid off and the privileges enjoyed by the Venetians since 1082, to the detriment of the Byzantine exchequer, had been brought to an end.<sup>58</sup>

Curiously, only a few years after the death of Manuel I in 1180, negotiations began to bring the Venetians back to Constantinople. Towards the end of 1183, the Venetians reoccupied their Embolo by the Golden Horn, and the following year a new treaty was concluded with Andronicus I, promising 1,500 gold pieces in compensation for the losses incurred in 1171. Andronicus was overthrown in 1185, but his successor, Isaac II Angelos, confirmed the agreement and specifically reissued the treaty made with Alexios I in 1082 along with all the trading privileges it contained. Similar *rapprochements* were made with the Genoese and the Pisans after their merchants were expelled from Constantinople in 1182.<sup>59</sup>



There were probably a number of reasons for this readiness to reinstate the Italian merchants. By 1185, the Byzantines were once more at war with the Normans of southern Italy and so were once more in need of naval support and of allies in the Italian peninsula. It is also likely that the Italians were invited back because they helped to maintain the economic prosperity of Constantinople through investment and stimulation of demand. The drain that their privileges made on the tax revenue was probably negligible by comparison.<sup>60</sup> There is a third possible reason, which may well have been the most important of all. By the mid-twelfth century Venetian, Pisan and Genoese merchants had come to dominate trade not only with western Europe and Egypt but also within the empire itself. They were to be found established in provincial towns such as Corinth, Dyrrachion, Thebes, Raideustos, Sparta and Almyros, from where they organized the shipping of agricultural produce such as corn, wine, cheese and oil both to Italy and to Constantinople.<sup>61</sup> They were therefore now playing a leading role in providing the Byzantine capital with items of everyday diet.

This was the situation inherited by Alexios III when he became emperor in 1195 and there is no indication that he planned to abandon the policy of his predecessors. As was customary, his accession to the throne brought a Venetian delegation hurrying to Constantinople, and a new treaty was signed in November 1198 which was in effect a restatement of those issued by the previous emperor. Venice received complete freedom from the *Kommerkion* whether importing or exporting goods, along with a good deal of judicial autonomy within the Embolo. In return the Venetians agreed to help the Byzantines if an attack was made on them by the ruler of southern Italy or by the emperor of the Germans.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time, Alexios was concerned to increase his revenues and so he could not resist testing the water every now and then. He often imposed duties on Venetians ships and cargoes in spite of the provisions of the treaty and dragged his feet in paying the outstanding compensation for the seizures of 1171. He also ostentatiously favoured one of Venice's main trading rivals, Pisa.<sup>63</sup> That does not mean that Alexios wanted to break with the Venetians altogether, however. For better or worse, they were part of Constantinople's economy. It was they, rather

than divine favour, that kept the city a byword for wealth and luxury and kept its citizens well fed and contented. It was, perhaps, the last that was the most important consideration, for what could happen when the people of Constantinople became angry and discontented was something that no emperor wished, or dared, to contemplate.

## CHAPTER 7

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# *Democracy*

The breathless accounts by visitors of the wealth and splendour of Constantinople were based, of course, on what they saw of the lives of the rich and powerful. Inevitably, it was only a tiny proportion of Constantinople's citizens that lived in such style and there was a huge gulf between them and the rest of the population. For the educated aesthetes of the palace, these people had no right to any say in how the empire should be run and were described disdainfully by the wealthy courtier Niketas Choniates as

the stupid and ignorant inhabitants of Constantinople ...  
the sausage sellers and tanners, as well as those who  
pass the days in taverns and eke out a niggardly existence  
from cobbling and with difficulty earn their  
bread from sewing.<sup>1</sup>

After all, they lacked the requisite education in the classics and spoke a vulgar and homely Greek that was a source of wry amusement and pained condescension to the likes of Choniates. Princess Anna Comnena, in her biography of her father, felt compelled to offer a translation of a popular song into a more archaic and 'proper' form for the benefit of her readers: everyday Byzantine Greek, the idiom that was rapidly developing into the demotic Greek heard today in Greece and Cyprus, was simply not acceptable in ruling circles.<sup>2</sup> That anyone who spoke like that should have any entry into the corridors of power

was unthinkable. Yet once again, theory and reality were at odds. The people of Constantinople were by no means silent and downtrodden proles, helpless before the monolithic weight of imperial authority. They had a voice, and even if it did not express itself in elegant Greek it certainly made itself heard.

It is sometimes difficult to escape from the influence of the bureaucrats of the palace, who wrote the histories and letters from which most of our information about Byzantine Constantinople comes, and to catch a glimpse of the city's ordinary folk. Nevertheless, they were there. As well as the butchers, tanners, innkeepers, shoemakers and tailors mentioned by Choniates, there would also have been shopkeepers, bakers, fishermen, shipbuilders and those who lived by the myriad other trades that flourished in the great city. Then there were also the women who played an active part in the city's economy and owned the market stalls that sold everything from pies to jewellery.<sup>3</sup> Given the advantages of flourishing trade and a money economy, their lot in general was probably much better than that of their counterparts elsewhere in the medieval world. Those advantages should not be exaggerated, however, for Constantinople had plenty of social problems.

Perhaps first and foremost was the overcrowded state of some parts of the city, quarters that were by no means as glamorous and awe-inspiring as the Augousteion and the great forums and which were hidden away behind the façades of the magnificent palaces and churches. The most populous districts lay to the north of the Mese, between the church of the Holy Apostles and the Forum of Constantine, before they gave way to the more fashionable district of Sphorakion which occupied the area between the Forum and the Arch of the Milion. At least one visitor looked beyond the main tourist sites and noticed that

The city itself is squalid and fetid and in many places harmed by permanent darkness, for the wealthy overshadow the streets with buildings and leave these dirty, dark places to the poor and to travellers ...<sup>4</sup>

Typical of the dwellings in Constantinople's back streets were the 'miserable and disgusting quarters' given to one visiting dignitary, who

complained that they ‘neither kept out the cold nor afforded shelter from the heat’ and had no supply of water. Some streets and squares were covered in mud and roamed by stray dogs.<sup>5</sup> Here people lived in three-, four- or even five-storey tenement blocks. The scholar John Tzetzes, who lived on the first floor of such a building, complained bitterly of his sufferings in a letter. The priest and his family who lived above had numerous children and kept pigs up there with them. Quite apart from the noise, urine from the pigs and the children used to seep down into Tzetzes’s room. Underneath, there was a farmer who used his rooms to store hay. Another three-storey house had a donkey mill in the basement.<sup>6</sup>

The authorities were aware of the problems likely to arise from houses and apartments being packed so tightly together, and had introduced building regulations to lay down the minimum space between buildings. There was supposed, for example, to be at least ten feet between houses before either householder could construct a balcony, otherwise it would ruin the other’s view and cut out the sunlight.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless disputes between neighbours were common. One curious case has been recorded because it involved one of the architects of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, Anthemius of Tralles, back in the sixth century. His neighbour, a lawyer called Zeno, constructed a balcony that spoiled the view from Anthemius’s window. When the subsequent court case went against him, Anthemius plotted revenge. He took advantage of the fact that Zeno’s elegant salon was built over one of Anthemius’s ground floor rooms. The architect filled a number of kettles with water and ran leather pipes from them to beams of the ceiling. He then boiled the water in the kettles, causing the steam to rise up the pipes. With nowhere to escape, the steam pressed against the beams and caused them to shake violently overturning the furniture in the room above and causing Zeno and his guests to run out into the street in panic thinking that a major earthquake had struck.<sup>8</sup>

The overcrowding of the city had another unfortunate result. Accidents frequently occurred when crowds of people were gathered. During the 960s, panic broke out among the spectators at the Hippodrome who thought that they were about to be attacked by imperial troops. In the ensuing stampede, many people were trampled to death.<sup>9</sup> Apart from

overcrowding, the inhabitants of Constantinople suffered from all the other problems of large cities. Crime was rife, especially in the dark and crowded quarters.<sup>10</sup> Prostitution flourished, one visitor primly asserting that just as Constantinople exceeded other cities in wealth, so it excelled them in vice. Various attempts had been made by the authorities to stamp it out, including the creation of a sanctuary for those who wanted to escape exploitation. It was much more common, however, for emperors to be numbered among the clients than among the rescuers of prostitutes.<sup>11</sup> Inevitably, even in a city renowned for its wealth, there was poverty. One well-educated but impoverished suppliant addressed repeated appeals to the emperor, begging for help in his impoverished old age:

Send a spark from your golden rays ... so that I may  
be able to warm myself from the cold throughout  
the year ... because I am undergoing a double frost ...  
[T]he one that keeps blowing upon me is the bitter  
wind of poverty ... the other is the cold that I endure  
from adversity.<sup>12</sup>

There were physical dangers too. Fires were a regular hazard. On 25 July 1197, for example, a major conflagration broke out in the grain and oil warehouses around the Droungarios Gate in the Sea Walls, close to the Venetian quarter. It burned all night and well into the next day, creating such heat that the lead on the roofs melted and poured down like rainwater. A large swathe of the harbour area was gutted, with mansions, churches and monasteries reduced to ruins.<sup>13</sup> Another peril was earthquakes, such as that which occurred in the spring of 1162, causing a number of buildings to collapse. More severe was that of 25 October 989 which turned houses 'into tombs for the inhabitants' and even brought down part of the dome of Hagia Sophia.<sup>14</sup> All these disasters would have left many people homeless and destitute.

Some protection was afforded to better-off tradesmen and manual workers by joining a guild. At least nineteen of these are known to have existed and they covered trades from leather cutters and candle makers to bakers and innkeepers. Membership was expensive but it

probably brought some kind of financial protection in the event of ill fortune. Guild members were also entitled to participate in certain imperial ceremonies and processions. Indeed, they were expected to do so and could be fined for not turning up.<sup>15</sup>

For the many who could not afford guild membership, the hardness of everyday life would have been mitigated by some opportunity for leisure and an escape from the everyday grind. As in medieval western Europe, most holidays were religious festivals and saints' days. The great feasts of the church such as Easter Sunday and the Assumption of the Virgin (15 August) were occasions for grand imperial processions. Lesser feasts were celebrated in more homely fashion, the Ascension of the Prophet Elijah on 20 July being marked by the staging of a miracle play.<sup>16</sup> There was also a host of festivals that were specific to certain localities or groups, such as the guilds who staged annual processions in honour of their patron saint. The guild of notaries, for example, had its special holiday on 25 November, the feast of the Holy Notaries, Marcian and Martyrius, two obscure individuals who were martyred by a heretical patriarch in 351.<sup>17</sup>

The festivals were no doubt the excuse for a great deal of fun that had no connection whatsoever with the religious ceremonies. Moreover, curious though it may seem in such an overtly Christian society, there were many festivals that had no link whatsoever with the Church and which probably had their origins in pagan times. There was, for example, the feast of Agatha, which was celebrated only by female weavers with singing, dancing and processions.<sup>18</sup> Another festival took place around midsummer, when a series of curious rituals were enacted. People would gather privately in their homes with friends and dress the eldest daughter of the house in a wedding dress. Objects would be thrown into a vase containing sea water. The girl would then draw out some of the objects at random and predict the fate of their owners. Drinking and dancing would follow and the revellers would spill out into the summer night to jump over lighted bonfires. The Church took a dim view of this kind of thing and banned it in the 1170s, though evidently without much success, for elements of the custom still survive in Greece and the southern Balkans.<sup>19</sup>

The very persistence of such traditions in Byzantine Constantinople is a good indication that its people had minds of their own and did not blindly accept everything that was handed down from higher authority. On the contrary, the Constantinopolitan mob was a fearsome and dangerous phenomenon which regularly made its feelings known. With such a large population concentrated so tightly in an urban setting, news, ideas and resentments could spread very quickly and a large crowd be gathered in no time at all. The dangers of popular unrest were ever present and the tiniest spark could ignite a serious conflagration.

One recurring source of tension during the twelfth century arose from Constantinople's rich ethnic mix. Thanks to its political and commercial importance, Constantinople was thronged with pilgrims, traders and immigrants from all over the world. Apart from the Italian merchants who lived in their special compounds by the Golden Horn, there were other westerners who served as mercenary soldiers in the imperial armies, particularly Normans, English, French and Scandinavians, as well as passing pilgrims. The Byzantines tended to refer to all these western European immigrants indiscriminately as 'Latins'. There were Turkic people such as Pechenegs and Cumans who also served in the imperial armies, and a small Arab community mostly composed of merchants. There were even some Christian Africans, probably from Nubia, who came as pilgrims or served as guards in the palace.<sup>20</sup> Constantinople also had a significant Jewish presence, not inside the city itself but in the suburb of Galata on the other side of the Golden Horn where a community of some 2,500 souls could be found.<sup>21</sup>

These groups were all allowed to have their own places of worship. The westerners had their special churches in which the mass was said in Latin rather than Greek, and the Slavs had theirs where the liturgy was in Old Church Slavonic. The English had a church dedicated to St Nicholas and St Augustine of Canterbury, the Scandinavians one to St Olaf, and the Russians had their church of St Boris and St Gleb.<sup>22</sup> More surprisingly in this overwhelmingly Christian city there were mosques for the Arabs, one of which, known as the Mitaton, stood just outside the Sea Walls on the Golden Horn.<sup>23</sup> Part of the reason for the existence of the mosques was, of course, that the Byzantines



had treaties with several Muslim powers, but the same concession was also accorded to the Jews, who had no outside government to protect them. There were synagogues in Galata and it was enshrined in Byzantine law that Jews were to be afforded the same protection of the law as everyone else.<sup>24</sup>

For the most part these different groups lived alongside each other without tension. Indeed John Tzetzes prided himself on his ability to speak to the people he met in the streets in their own languages:

One finds me a Scythian (Pecheneg) among Scythians,  
Latin among Latins, and among any other tribe a  
member of that folk. When I embrace a Scythian I  
accost him in such a way: 'Good day, my lady, good  
day my lord: *salamalek alti, salamalek altugep*' ...  
To a Latin I speak in the Latin language: 'Welcome,  
my lord, welcome, my brother: *Bene venesti, domine,  
bene venesti frater*' ... So I talk with all of them in a  
proper and befitting way; I know the skill of the best  
management.<sup>25</sup>

There is no evidence that the populace of Constantinople resented the presence of Muslims, for example. The burning down of a mosque is recorded on one occasion but there is no sign that the Muslims were specifically being targeted, for a church was ransacked on the same occasion.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the relatively small number of Arab and Turkish merchants meant that their presence went largely unnoticed.

As in other parts of the Christian world, Jews were sometimes singled out for scorn and denunciation because they were seen as enemies of Christianity and the descendants of the crucifiers of Christ. Numerous stories circulated in Byzantine literature of their supposed machinations against the true faith. There was, for example, the tale of the Jew who attacked an icon of Christ in Hagia Sophia with a knife: the icon at once spurted blood all over its assailant who was then arrested on suspicion of murder. Only when he allegedly showed his accusers the icon with the knife still in it was he believed and he subsequently converted to Christianity, along with his whole family.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, the Jews in Galata often faced petty restrictions, such as not being allowed to ride on horseback, and occasional harassment from their neighbours:

For their condition is very low and there is much hatred against them, which is fostered by the tanners, who throw out their dirty water in the streets before the doors of the Jewish houses and defile the Jews' quarter. So the Greeks hate the Jews, good and bad alike, and subject them to great oppression, and beat them in the streets and in every way treat them with rigour.<sup>28</sup>

There were even some examples of officially sanctioned persecution, as under Romanos I Lekapenos (920–44). There was, however, never anything in Byzantium along the lines of the savage pogroms perpetrated against the Jews in England, Germany and elsewhere in western Europe at the time of the Crusades. There even survives a letter from a Jew living in Thessalonica, the second city of the Byzantine empire, which contrasts conditions for Jews there favourably with the situation he had left behind in Egypt.<sup>29</sup>

When it comes to the Italian mercantile communities, particularly the Venetians, Pisans and Genoese, however, the picture is much darker. As their share of Constantinople's maritime trade had increased during the twelfth century, thanks to the treaties that their home cities had negotiated with the Byzantine emperor, so had their numbers. One contemporary estimated there to be 60,000 of them in Constantinople by 1182, an evident exaggeration but one which betrays how the Byzantines felt that the Italians were coming to proliferate in their city.<sup>30</sup>

There were other causes of resentment. Thanks to their treaties, the Italians enjoyed a privileged position in Constantinople's trade, and a certain amount of judicial immunity within their own commercial quarters along the Golden Horn. For example, the treaty agreed between Venice and Alexios III in 1198 allowed Venetians in Constantinople to have their case heard by Venetian judges in all cases apart from murder and riot.<sup>31</sup> Had the Italians been concentrated, like the Jews, in a distant suburb such as Galata these privileges might have gone

unnoticed, but their enclaves were all sited along the most crowded area of Constantinople, right under the noses of the most volatile section of the city's population. Before long, dislike of the Venetians in particular was becoming widespread for reasons that were voiced by the historian John Kinnamos:

The nation is corrupt in character, jesting and rude more than any other because it is filled with sailors' vulgarity. As they formerly offered an allied force to Emperor Alexios [I Komnenos] when that Robert [Guiscard] crossed from Italy to Dyrrachion and besieged the place, they received various recompense, and in particular a confined space in Constantinople was assigned to them ... Also on this account they alone of all the rest pay tithes on commerce to none of the Romans from it. Their immoderate enrichment from that source quickly elevated them to boastfulness. They used to treat the citizen like a slave, not merely one of the general commonality, but even one who took pride in the rank of *sebastos* ...<sup>32</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to see the people of Constantinople simply as narrow-minded xenophobes who were roused to fury by the wealth and success of the Italians. The situation was much more complicated than that. A major contributing factor to the volatility was the deep antagonisms that existed between the Italians themselves. All were deadly commercial rivals who were frequently at war with each other and who often carried on their battles in and around Constantinople. The Pisans and Venetians used regularly to fight in the street and their ships clashed in the Bosphorus within sight of the Sea Walls.<sup>33</sup>

The stage was set for some very ugly intercommunal violence along the shores of the Golden Horn as the Byzantine population became involved in the fighting. The first outbreak seems to have occurred in 1162. The Pisans and Venetians had temporarily patched up their differences and banded together to mount an attack on the Genoese quarter. In this enterprise they were joined by a mob of local

Byzantines. Outnumbered and caught off-guard, the Genoese were driven out of Constantinople.<sup>34</sup> Only in 1170 did the Genoese return, with the blessing of the Emperor Manuel I, but almost at once the Venetians attacked them again, demolishing many of the houses within their compound. This time Manuel I took drastic action, and the recurring incidents of communal violence were probably one of the reasons behind his decision to have all the Venetian residents of Constantinople arrested in March 1171.<sup>35</sup>

In later decades, however, the Constantinopolitan mob ceased to participate in the quarrels of the Italians and attacked them on their own account. The worst incident took place in May 1182. Taking advantage of the political upheaval that was then going on as Andronicus Komnenos seized power, and spurred on by rumours that the Italians were planning to take over the city, a large crowd invaded the Genoese and Pisan quarters on the Golden Horn. The casualties were less than they might have been because many of the Italians had heard about what was going to happen beforehand and had fled in ships. Those left behind, however, mainly the old and the sick, were killed without mercy and there were reports of pregnant women being among the victims. Even a hospital was attacked and the patients murdered in their beds.<sup>36</sup>

After the Venetians, Genoese and Pisans had been compensated for their losses and brought back into the city, the emperors still had great difficulty in restraining their own citizens. In 1187 when another outbreak occurred, the emperor sent officials to defuse the situation, but an incident was averted not thanks to their efforts but to a ruse on the part of the Italians. Collecting up the bodies of some Byzantines who had been killed in a skirmish the night before, they cut their hair and dressed them in western clothes to look like Latin victims of the mob. This had a sobering effect on the crowd who decided that they had done enough damage and dispersed.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the people of Constantinople remained an unpredictable and dangerous force that had to be handled with extreme care.

Although the unjust punishment of a thief or hatred of the Italians might push the people of Constantinople to violence, the most

common cause of upheaval was resentment against the emperor or the policies that he was pursuing. For once again, theory and practice were widely at odds when it came to the role of the voiceless majority in Byzantine political life. The theory was that the emperor, God's vice-gerent, was an absolute ruler, answerable to God alone. Democracy had no part to play in this scheme of things, as Eusebius of Caesarea had made clear:

Monarchy excels all other kinds of constitution and government. For rather do anarchy and civil war result from the alternative, a polyarchy based on equality. For which reason there is one God, not two or three or even more.<sup>38</sup>

In practice, the emperors knew that their power could be seriously challenged by the Constantinopolitan mob. As Choniates disapprovingly observed:

Their indifference to the authorities was preserved as though it were an innate evil; him whom today they extol as an upright and just ruler, tomorrow they will disparage as a malefactor, thus displaying in both instances their lack of judgement and inflammable temperament.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, opposition to a reigning emperor was frequently voiced. Among the courtiers, scurrilous songs and pasquinades lampooning the ruler and his consort circulated freely. Alexios I Komnenos even found some, directed at himself, scrawled on a piece of paper left in his tent while he was on campaign in the Balkans. But such activity was risky. The chances of keeping one's identity and authorship secret were slim in that closed world and discovery meant instant dismissal and exile to some wretched town far from the capital.<sup>40</sup>

Those outside the charmed circle of the court, on the other hand, had much less to lose and consequently nothing to fear. If a large group of people decided to vent their feeling there was, in practice, very little

that the emperor could do about it. To take one example, Nikephoros II Phokas (969–76), although a successful general, was never popular in Constantinople, largely because of the heavy taxes that he levied to pay his army. On one occasion, as he rode through the streets of the city he was greeted with a chorus of yells, boos and insults. No retribution followed. Nikephoros rode on looking neither to left nor to right and put the incident down to drunken high spirits. He was not the only butt of popular resentment. The Empress Euphrosyne, wife of Alexios III Angelos, was also greeted with catcalls and jeers whenever she appeared in public, and people even taught their pet parrots to mock and mimic her. There were limits. When one woman and her daughter went so far as to hurl stones at the emperor from the roof of their house, soldiers were sent in and both were executed. In general, however, the emperors took a conciliatory line towards such behaviour, preferring to allow their subjects to get their anger off their chests. Nevertheless, Nikephoros II took the precaution of building a strong wall around the Great Palace.<sup>41</sup>

Nikephoros was right to take precautions, for the people of Constantinople did not restrict themselves to words in their opposition to unpopular rulers. If the emperor miscalculated and pushed his luck too far, the result could be a popular uprising. His advisers would have been able to remind him of the so-called Nika riot of January 532 when the Hippodrome factions had united in their opposition to the Emperor Justinian and had very nearly brought about his overthrow. Nothing had changed by the twelfth century, for mob violence could be sparked off by the slightest pretext. In around 1200 a riot began over the arrest and flogging of a thief. The crowd were incensed because they knew that the man had been acting on the orders of a corrupt prison governor, John Lagos, who set his charges free by night to steal and then took a cut of the proceeds. A pitched battle with fully armoured troops ensued, some rioters clambering onto the roofs and hurling down stones and tiles. The next day, all was quiet, the episode apparently having been completely forgotten, but it was another reminder of how volatile and dangerous the emperor's subjects could be.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most dramatic of such incidents occurred in 1042. The background to the affair was this. The emperor Constantine

VIII (1025–8) had died leaving only three daughters. The eldest, Zoe, had then married a prominent nobleman, and her husband became emperor as Romanos III Argyros (1028–34). When he accidentally drowned in the bath (an accident that some said had been engineered by his wife), Zoe married again, this time to Michael IV (1034–41). When it looked as if he too would shortly pass away, Zoe, rather than looking for a third husband, instead adopted Michael's young nephew Michael Kalaphates. On the emperor's death, Zoe's adopted son became Michael V (1041–2), the idea being that he would rule alongside, and in deference to, the legitimate empress. This was considered to be only right, given Michael V's humble origins: His father had earned his living by caulking the hulls of ships before they were launched into the Golden Horn.<sup>43</sup>

Within a few months, however, the headstrong Michael V had grown tired of Zoe's presence and decided to free himself of her tutelage. Aided and abetted by his uncle Constantine who held the office of *Nobilissimos*, he laid careful plans. Both the emperor and the *Nobilissimos* were well aware that their action might not go down well with all sections of Constantinople's population. There was a strong sense of loyalty to the Macedonian dynasty, from which Zoe was descended, and her sidelining might be resented. Michael therefore first tested the prevailing mood by processing publicly to Hagia Sophia on Easter Sunday. He was pleased to note a favourable reaction. Cheers greeted his appearance and silk carpets were strewn in his path. A procession to the church of the Holy Apostles the following Sunday brought forth a similar response.<sup>44</sup>

Convinced now of the populace's personal loyalty to him, Michael acted swiftly. Guards were sent to Zoe's room in the Great Palace. She was shorn of her hair and shipped off to a convent on the island of *Prinkipo* in the Sea of Marmara. The *eparch* or governor of the city of Constantinople, *Anastasius*, was despatched to the Forum of *Constantine* to read out a proclamation announcing the coup and promising that the people would reap great benefits from the change of regime. The announcement was greeted with stunned silence by the assembled crowd, until a single voice cried out:

We do not want a blasphemer of the cross and a caulker as our emperor, but the original heir, our mother Zoe!<sup>45</sup>

The cry was taken up by the whole throng and Anastasius judged it prudent to retire from the scene with some alacrity. Michael and his uncle had seriously miscalculated and could only look on in horror as rioting broke out across the city. The culmination of the popular reaction is described in detail by an eyewitness, the statesman and courtier Michael Psellos, who on 20 April 1042 was working in the Great Palace:

I was in the outer porch, dictating some of the more confidential dispatches, when suddenly there assailed our ears a hubbub like the sound of horses' hooves and the hearts of most of us trembled at the sound. Then there came a messenger with the news that all the people were roused against the emperor ...

From his vantage point, Psellos had a good view of the oncoming mob:

Every man was armed; one clasped in his hands an axe, another brandished a heavy iron broadsword, another handled a bow, and another a spear, but the bulk of the mob, with some of the biggest stones in the folds of their clothing and holding others ready in their hands, ran in general disorder ... And the women – but how can I explain this to people who do not know them? I myself saw some of them, whom nobody till then had seen outside the women's quarters, appearing in public and shouting and beating their breasts and lamenting terribly at the empress's misfortune ... 'Where can she be', they cried, 'she who alone is noble of heart and alone is beautiful? Where can she be, she who alone of all women is free, the mistress of all the imperial family, the rightful heir to the empire, whose



father was emperor, whose grandfather was monarch before him – yes and great-grandfather too? How was it this low-born fellow dared to raise a hand against a woman of such lineage?’<sup>46</sup>

The first target of the crowd was the mansions owned by members of the emperor’s family, all of which were reduced to rubble within a few hours. In the palace, the emperor had realized his mistake and had had Zoe hastily shipped back from the convent. She was taken to the *Kathisma*, the emperor’s own viewing box that overlooked the Hippodrome, to reassure the crowd that she was unharmed, but the stratagem did nothing to abate their fury. Instead they marched off to find another of Constantine VIII’s daughters, Theodora, and took her off to Hagia Sophia where she was proclaimed empress.

Michael and his uncle Constantine now panicked and hurried down to the harbour of Boukoleon where they boarded a ship. After sailing along by the southern Sea Walls, they landed at the monastery of St John Stoudios and took sanctuary in its church. The building was soon surrounded by an angry crowd who threatened to pull it down over the heads of the fugitives. At this point, however, a detachment of soldiers arrived, accompanied by Psellos, to take control of the situation. Forcing their way through the crowd, they gained admission to the church. Until then, wrote Psellos:

I too had gone along with the mob, having no moderate feeling about [the Emperor Michael]. I was not indifferent to his treatment of the empress [Zoe], and a certain mild resentment against the man stirred me on my own account. But when I reached the sacred altar where he was, and saw both the refugees, one, who had been emperor, clinging to the Holy Table of the Word, and the other, the Nobilissimos, standing on the right of the altar, both with their clothes changed, their spirit gone and utterly put to shame, then there was no trace whatever of anger left in my heart.<sup>47</sup>

By now it was getting dark and another official arrived to ask Michael and Constantine to leave the church, promising them that they would not be harmed. When they refused and clung even more tightly to the altar, the mob could be restrained no longer and burst in to drag the two men from their sanctuary. Once they were off consecrated ground, they in all probability would have been lynched had not yet another official arrived bearing a branding iron and instructions from Theodora that they were to be blinded. Psellos describes how the two men reacted when they learned their fate. Constantine, realizing that there was no escape, offered himself as the first victim, lying down on the ground with the crowd jostling for a better view. Michael, on the other hand, was overcome with terror and had to be forced to the ground and held down so that the deed could be done, possibly by the chief Varangian, Harold Hardrada. So ended Michael's five-month reign. He was despatched to a monastery to live out the rest of his life as a monk. In the battle to unthroned him, some 3,000 citizens of Constantinople had been killed.<sup>48</sup>

The events of 1042 were particularly dramatic but they were by no means unique. In 945 the people of Constantinople had protested vociferously to prevent the legitimate emperor of the Macedonian dynasty, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos, great-grandfather of Zoe and Theodora, from being sidelined by the Lekapenos family.<sup>49</sup> Nor did the crowd always act in favour of legitimacy. In 1057, Michael VI was replaced by Isaac Komnenos when a popular revolt in Constantinople forced him to flee.<sup>50</sup> Such support from the people could be fickle. Andronicus I, who was welcomed into Constantinople in 1182, was lynched by a mob in the Hippodrome just three years later.<sup>51</sup>

In view of such salutary lessons, the emperors were well aware of the need to consider public opinion and to present themselves in a way likely to secure popular approval. One way in which they did this was by ensuring that the high claims that they made for their office and the visible symbols by which that was made manifest should be viewed by as wide an audience as possible. In spite of the wall built by Nikephoros Phokas, the Great Palace, far from being an enclosed fortress where the emperor secluded himself from his subjects, was open to

the public from soon after daybreak until nine o'clock and again after three in the afternoon. There was, moreover, a covered walkway which connected the Great Palace to the *Kathisma*. Here and at other locations, he would show himself and his family to the crowd on high days and holidays, the occasion often accompanied by music. The great imperial ceremonies, such as the processions to Hagia Sophia on important feast days, were specifically designed to evoke the admiration and awe of the emperor's subjects.<sup>52</sup>

Placating public opinion, however, went far beyond lordly displays of imperial dignity and frequently descended to shameless bribery. One way of doing this was to distribute honorific titles, such as membership of the Senate, more widely. So, soon after his accession, Constantine X Doukas (1059–67), according to Michael Psellos, conferred senatorial status on manual workers and abolished previous distinctions of ranks. Alexios III Angelos was therefore following a well-established precedent when he bestowed prestigious titles and offices on 'the baseborn, the vulgar, the money changers and the linen merchants'. The most visual expression of an emperor trying to appeal to the mass of the population was a painted panel commissioned by Andronicus I on the gates of the church of the Forty Martyrs. The emperor was depicted, wearing not the usual imperial vestments but the costume of a labourer, and holding a sickle in his hand. Andronicus was about to launch his purge of the court aristocracy and this was perhaps a way of appealing for popular support.<sup>53</sup>

Titles could only be used to buy the allegiance of a small section of the populace, so for the rest, the emperors of Byzantium resorted to much the same policy as that of their Roman predecessors, that of 'bread and circuses'. Lavish entertainments were laid on during public holidays to keep the Constantinopolitans contented and occupied. The fountains in the palace courtyard were made to gush wine and gold coins were scattered to the crowd.<sup>54</sup>

Most effective of all were the spectacular shows organized in the Hippodrome. During the fifth and sixth centuries, the main event in the Hippodrome had been chariot races, with much of the population being divided between two supporters' clubs, the Blues and the Greens. By the twelfth century, chariot races were still being run but

they took place much less frequently, about three times a year, and were much more firmly under official control, no doubt with a view to restraining the crowd trouble that had been endemic in the past.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, race days were spectacular and impressive occasions, as emerges from an account left by an Arab visitor:

One day before the day of the assembly, a proclamation is made in the town that the emperor intends to visit the Hippodrome. The people hasten thither for the spectacle and jostle in throngs and in the morning the emperor comes with his intimates and servants, all of them dressed in red ...<sup>56</sup>

The whole city would be gripped by feverish excitement, a provincial visitor complaining about the noise and mayhem that broke loose as the crowd surged towards the Hippodrome. The emperor would take his seat in the *Kathisma* and the show would begin with various entertainments and displays, including wrestling contests and displays of juggling. Emperors varied the diet according to their own fancy. Nikephoros II Phokas and Constantine VIII introduced gladiatorial contests, though these bouts were not, it would seem, to the death. Andronicus I laid on tightrope walking and acrobatics. Constantine IX Monomachos, who loved nothing more than a good show, had a giraffe and an elephant paraded around the arena to the delight of the crowd.<sup>57</sup> When these preliminaries were over, the main business of the day began:

The last entertainment is the horse races. Beforehand they prepare agile and trained horses, and eight horses are brought forward. They also have in readiness two big vehicles embellished with gold. To each of them four horses are harnessed, and in them two men take their places, dressed in clothes woven of gold. Then they let the horses go, urging them on until they reach the two gates, and outside this gate there is a place with idols and statues and the drivers have to wheel around

them three times in competition with one another.  
Whoever wins is laden with gifts.<sup>58</sup>

Some of the entertainments provided in the Hippodrome were less concerned with display or competition and more with pitiless cruelty. Before the chariot racing began, various species of wild animals would sometimes be set on each other, in ascending order of fierceness: dogs upon foxes, cheetahs upon antelopes, and finally lions on bulls.<sup>59</sup> Animals were not the only victims, for the Hippodrome was often the venue for high-profile public executions. In about 1104, for example, the leader of the heretical Bogomil sect was publicly burned there. This was a relatively rare occurrence in Byzantium, which never reacted to heresy with the same ferocity as did western Europe in the later Middle Ages and the Reformation. Nevertheless, the reaction of the crowd to the spectacle was to demand that all the members of the sect be consigned to the flames, something that the emperor declined to do. On another occasion, the crowd took matters into their own hands and burned a suspected sorcerer in the Hippodrome without bothering with the formality of a trial.<sup>60</sup>

Not surprisingly, in view of some of these activities, the Hippodrome was not entirely approved of by the Church. St John Chrysostom, who was bishop of Constantinople between 398 and 404, denounced the place as a 'Satanodrome' and it was considered to be an unsuitable place for monks, clergy and women. According to a pious fable, a monk who crept off to watch the races there was struck down by divine wrath. Byzantine law stipulated that a woman should not go there without the permission of her husband and for her to do so was grounds for divorce.<sup>61</sup> Yet there was never any question of the emperors suspending the entertainments in the Hippodrome. They played a vital role in providing a safety valve for the often violent passions of one section of the population.

There was another way in which the emperors placated the people of Constantinople that was less controversial and fitted in much better with the theory of the role of the Byzantine emperor in the world. Basil I, we are told, 'was a generous benefactor of the poor, spending lavish amounts of money on charity'.<sup>62</sup> He was not in the least unusual

in this, for most Byzantine emperors, if they reigned long enough, took care to undertake conspicuous works of charity. The emperor also played the leading role in any response to disasters, such as fires or earthquakes. When a fire devastated part of the northern area of Constantinople in the early 1190s, Isaac II Angelos was quick to pay out money to compensate those left homeless.<sup>63</sup>

There was, however, much more to this than just remedial alms-giving. The emperors were responsible for providing a series of charitable institutions which were unequalled elsewhere in the medieval Christian world and which provided social services of one kind or another to a significant proportion of the population. Alexios I Komnenos, for example, built a refuge for orphans, the disabled and former soldiers on the acropolis, one of the city's hills near the mouth of the Golden Horn, where several thousand people were fed and housed at the state's expense. There were so many beneficiaries in fact that Alexios's daughter, Anna Comnena, reckoned that if you wanted to visit every inmate it would have taken you all day from morning to evening:

I myself saw an old woman being assisted by a young girl, a blind person being led by the hand by another man who had his sight, a man without feet making use of others' feet, a man who had no hands being aided by the hands of his friends, babies being nursed by foster-mothers and the paralysed being waited on by strong, healthy men.<sup>64</sup>

Alexios's son, John II, established a hospital of fifty beds attached to the monastery of the Pantokrator in 1136. The remarkable thing about this foundation was that it was not a mere hospice where the sick were made comfortable but were not actually treated. The Pantokrator hospital was specifically organized to treat and cure specific conditions such as fractures, ophthalmia, and stomach disorders. Treatment at the hospital was free to those who could not afford to pay a doctor, and the doctors that staffed it were paid by the state. It was even laid

down that a certain number of female doctors were to be employed to tend women patients.<sup>65</sup>

Other similar institutions were scattered across the city. Isaac II attached a hospital to the church of the Forty Martyrs, while the older Hospital of St Sampson stood between the church of St Eirene and the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. The Myrelaion of Romanos I and Constantine IX's splendid monastic complex of St George in Mangana also had hospitals attached.<sup>66</sup> There were institutions to house the insane, the elderly and the poor, such as the *Ptochotropheion* or Hospice for Beggars, founded by Michael IV, and a hospital for lepers sequestered on the opposite side of the Golden Horn.<sup>67</sup>

In all this the emperors were ostensibly acting in accordance with Byzantine political theory which identified *philanthropeia* or love of mankind as one of the prime duties of the Emperor of the Romans. It was something that they had to be seen to do and hence the special rituals such as that on Maundy Thursday when the reigning emperor would visit every home for the aged in Constantinople and distribute gifts to the occupants.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, it should never be forgotten that simple self-preservation was also an element in imperial philanthropy. The fate of Michael V was a constant reminder of what could happen if the views and needs of the people of Constantinople were taken too lightly.

## CHAPTER 8

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# *The Beginning of the End*

According to legend, shortly after Constantinople had been inaugurated in 330, Constantine the Great consulted a famous astrologer, Vettius Valens, to discover how long the city would last. The answer was very precise: 696 years exactly. When the year 1026 came and went with nothing untoward taking place, such was the deep streak of pessimism in the Byzantine character, like that of their ancient Greek forebears, that it seemed impossible that the wealth and strength of the great city could last for ever. A succession of prophets of doom arose to predict when it would finally cease to be and when, as a consequence, the world would come to an end, since it was impossible to conceive the latter without the former.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, in the early years of the thirteenth century, Constantinople seemed as prosperous and secure as ever. On the wharfs and jetties along the Golden Horn, goods were unloaded and loaded, merchants bought and sold and visitors stared in wonder at the profusion of moveable wealth on display. In the domed churches the performance of the liturgical round went on serenely, watched by the silent host of mosaic saints and angels. Out on the periphery, the unconquered Land Walls stood sentinel as they had always done.

True, Alexios III Angelos had a long list of external problems to face. There could be no doubt that the power and prestige of the empire had diminished somewhat since the death of Manuel I in 1180. On the eastern frontier, the empire faced a resurgent Seljuk Turkish sultanate, based at Konya and ruled by Rukn al-Din (1196–1204), while in the west there



was the perennial threat that southern Italy might be used as a launch pad for an invasion of the Byzantine Balkans. There were internal dangers too, for two outlying Byzantine provinces had broken away from the centre. Cyprus had been seized by the king of England, Richard the Lionheart, while he was on his way to crusade in the Holy Land. Although Alexios had complained bitterly to the pope, there was still no sign that he was going to get the island back. In 1186 Bulgaria had revolted and by 1200 was an independent kingdom under its formidable tsar, Kalojan (1197–1207). Much of Alexios's reign was spent fighting the Bulgars and their Vlach allies in the Balkans, and while it cannot be said that he enjoyed great success in this undertaking, none of these enemies posed any direct threat to Constantinople itself. Few can have imagined at the time that this was the city's Indian summer.

The real weakness lay elsewhere. Behind the appearance of continued strength and prosperity lay a fatal flaw. It was nothing new. On the contrary, it had been a feature of the life of the city virtually since its foundation. The weakness was that, in spite of the exalted claims made for the person and office of emperor and in spite of all attempts to establish the hereditary principle, in practice the throne was within the reach of anyone who could muster sufficient force to seize it. As a result, in the previous two centuries, Constantinople had frequently been attacked not by the armies of a foreign power but by those gathered by an ambitious general or nobleman who hoped to unseat the reigning emperor. Moreover, unlike the sieges mounted by foreign powers, these attacks sometimes succeeded, especially when there was someone on the inside to assist the rebels. It was one such twist in the interminable saga of the struggles for the Byzantine throne that was to have catastrophic repercussions and was to begin the long process by which Byzantine Constantinople was almost completely to disappear.

Even by Byzantine standards, Alexios III's reign was particularly notable for plots and conspiracies. As a usurper who had reached the throne by overthrowing and blinding his brother Isaac, Alexios had little moral authority to cow those who were considering doing the same to him. Moreover, since he came to the throne relatively late in life, he did not have a son who was a *Porphyrogenitos*, born to the

wife of a reigning emperor in the purple chamber of the Great Palace, who would have been an obvious successor. That presented further incentive for rebellion as it meant that Alexios and his family seemed to have no better title to the throne than anyone else.

Alexios and his wife Euphrosyne did have three children who had been born before his accession but they were all daughters, Eirene, Eudokia and Anna. The best policy in these circumstances was to marry them off to prominent noblemen and so provide a wealthy and able successor. In the case of Eudokia, that did not prove to be an easy task. She had been married, back in the 1180s before her father's accession. Her uncle, the unfortunate Isaac II, had negotiated a diplomatic match with Stefan, one of the sons of Stefan Nemanja, the ruler of Serbia (1166–96). Stefan was later to succeed his father as Stefan the First Crowned (1196–1228), but Eudokia was not destined to reign beside him for long, for the couple fell out disastrously. Eudokia complained about her husband's amorous affairs, his gluttony and excessive drinking, while Stefan declared that his wife was scabious. He finally got rid of her in 1198 by the tried and tested means of trumping up a charge of adultery. He had Eudokia seized and deprived her of most of her clothes, and she was sent back to Constantinople dressed only in her undergarments.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of this disgrace, as the daughter of a reigning emperor, Eudokia should have had no difficulty in finding another husband. Unfortunately, once back in Constantinople she entered into a passionate liaison with Alexios Doukas Mourtzouphlos, one of the conspirators who had helped her father to the throne in 1195. Mourtzouphlos was said to have loved Eudokia 'since the first appearance of hair on his cheek' but he was already a married man.<sup>3</sup>

Alexios had more success with his other daughters, both of whom were provided with their second husbands during 1199. The eldest, Eirene, married Alexios Palaiologos, a member of an old and distinguished family, while Anna was given to the rather more obscure Theodore Laskaris. As it turned out, Anna had the better match. The aristocratic Palaiologos died only a few years after the wedding, but Theodore soon carved out a high reputation as a soldier. Shortly after his marriage, he took part in the expedition against the rebel forces

of Ivanko in Philippopolis and proved himself to be able and enthusiastic.<sup>4</sup> In all probability, after Palaiologos's death, Alexios III would have regarded Laskaris as his likely successor.

There were plenty of people, however, who thought that they had a better claim to the throne than the upstart Laskaris did. One of these was John Komnenos Axouchos, a great-grandson of Emperor John II Komnenos, who formed a plot against Alexios III in the summer of 1200. Among his co-conspirators was the emperor's former supporter Alexios Doukas Mourtzouphlos. It is possible that Mourtzouphlos hoped that he would one day be free to marry Eudokia, in which case he too would have a claim to the throne.

On 31 July the rebels broke into Hagia Sophia where an obliging monk crowned John Komnenos as emperor. They then marched across the Hippodrome and forced their way into the Great Palace through a doorway below the *Kathisma*, the imperial box. Reaching the audience chamber, John, whose nickname was 'the Fat', sat himself down on the throne there, but it proved unequal to the burden of his weight and collapsed, sending the would-be emperor sprawling on the floor. A crowd of looters had managed to gain entry to the palace at the same time and made a spirited attempt to force entry to the chapel of the Holy Virgin of Pharos with its valuable collection of relics and its silver door hinges. While this was going on, however, Alexios III had been preparing a counter-strike from the Palace of Blachernae. A force was sent in boats along the Golden Horn, to disembark just to the north of the Great Palace. Joining up with the Varangian guard, it drove John Komnenos's supporters from the Hippodrome and then entered the palace to hunt down the usurper. Pursued through the corridors, John Komnenos was overtaken and decapitated. His supporters were soon rounded up. Mourtzouphlos was thrown into prison where he was to remain for the next three years. For the time being, any hopes on Eudokia's part that she might be allowed to marry him were dashed.<sup>5</sup>

Alexios III's triumph over John the Fat did not put an end to the threat to his position. There remained plenty of other candidates with a claim to the throne, not least Alexios's predecessor and brother Isaac II, who was still alive. Alexios, however, seems to have regarded Isaac as presenting little danger. The former emperor was, after all, completely

blind and was securely held as a prisoner at Diplokionion on the Bosphorus to the north of Constantinople. Consequently, Alexios allowed him a comfortable existence and permitted visitors to come and go. The emperor also released Isaac's son, who was also named Alexios, and allowed him to move freely around the city. Perhaps he thought that young Alexios could do no harm since he was not a *Porphyrogenitos*, having been born before Isaac became emperor.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever motivated Alexios's leniency, he had underestimated his brother. Among the visitors to Diplokionion were numerous western Europeans, possibly men who had found favour at court during Isaac's reign. Isaac secretly entrusted them with letters to be delivered to his daughter Eirene when they returned home. Eirene was married to Philip, duke of Swabia, the claimant to the German imperial crown, and from her distant home she established contact with her father and brother, promising them help in restoring Isaac to the throne.

In September 1201, Alexios III unwittingly provided an opportunity for them to take advantage of this offer. Another potential usurper was giving trouble in Thrace, and the emperor led his army out to deal with the threat. For some reason, he took his nephew with him and that proved to be a great mistake. Young Alexios succeeded in escaping from the army and making his way to the small port of Athyra on the Sea of Marmara where a boat was waiting to ferry him out to a Pisan merchant vessel at anchor just offshore. His disappearance was soon noticed in Alexios III's camp, but although orders were given to search ships in the Sea of Marmara, the fugitive was not apprehended. It was said that he could not be found by the officials who boarded his vessel because he had cut his hair, donned Italian clothes and so become indistinguishable from the rest of the crew. The ship was allowed to proceed and it delivered its passenger safely to the Italian port of Ancona.<sup>7</sup>

Young Alexios had a clear purpose in his flight to the West. He was hoping to acquire that essential prerequisite for any attempt on the Byzantine throne, an army. The best kind of army to have was one composed of western European mercenaries, the type of men whom Niketas Choniates described as 'wrought of bronze and delighting in blood'. It was with an army composed of such soldiers that Alexios

I Komnenos had seized Constantinople back in 1081, and young Alexios no doubt had such precedents in mind as he headed north from Ancona with a few followers, bound for his brother-in-law's court in Germany.<sup>8</sup>

He had only got as far as Verona, however, when he received news that must have seemed like an answer to his prayers. In the nearby port of Venice a huge army of French and Flemish knights was gathering waiting to embark on a fleet of Venetian ships. The leaders of this expedition, which later came to be known as the Fourth Crusade, planned to sail to Egypt to fight against the Saracens there and ultimately to recover Jerusalem. Unfortunately, their plans were being hampered by shortage of money. They were in dispute with the Venetians over the price of their passage to Egypt and were unable to raise the sum demanded. Thus Alexios was able to contact the leaders and offer to solve their difficulties. If they would first accompany him to Constantinople and help him to overthrow his uncle and restore the imprisoned Isaac II to the throne, he would provide them in return with generous financial assistance from the Byzantine treasury for their enterprise in Egypt and the Holy Land.<sup>9</sup> It seemed to be the perfect arrangement for both sides.

When, in June 1203, young Alexios returned to Constantinople accompanied by a Venetian fleet of some 200 ships, under the command of the doge, Enrico Dandolo, along with thousands of formidably armed western knights and foot soldiers, many Byzantines probably expected just another routine stand-off between two claimants to the Byzantine throne. To start with events lived up to that expectation.

It was usual in these cases for the rebel claimant to make some kind of appeal to the people of Constantinople in the hope that they would take his side and open the gates of the city. It had happened on occasion before and there was good reason to hope that it might work this time. After all, Alexios III was not popular and his nephew was representing the aggrieved party. Young Alexios therefore boarded a galley, was rowed across from the fleet's anchorage at Chalcedon and stood prominently on deck as the vessel was rowed up and down before the Sea Walls to show himself to the crowds that had gathered there. He

was not greeted by the catcalls and jeers that were often hurled at rebel leaders but neither did he receive any encouragement. Most of the onlookers responded with stony silence, while a few shouted that they had no idea who the young man was.<sup>10</sup> It was a sensible reaction. At this stage of the game Alexios III, secure behind the defences of Constantinople, seemed to hold all the advantages. It did not matter who prevailed in the end, provided that one avoided being associated with the losing side.

When an appeal to the people failed, as it often did, the next step for a would-be usurper was some kind of demonstration of military might which usually fell short of an all-out assault on the city. This is what young Alexios's western allies attempted on 5 July 1203. The Venetian fleet sailed across from Chalcedon and allowed the army to make a landing close to the suburb of Galata. Once ashore, they were much more successful than they had probably hoped, capturing the Kastellion tower that secured the chain across the Golden Horn on the Galata side. The Latins were therefore able to lower the chain and bring their fleet into the Golden Horn. From there, over the next few weeks, they were able to make assaults on the Sea Walls at their weakest point, where it was possible to bring ships armed with scaling ladders close inshore. What had started as just a demonstration of resolve had delivered to the besieging army an advantage which very few of their predecessors had enjoyed.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of these menacing developments, the Byzantine response suggests that they still saw the episode in terms of competition for the throne and not as an assault on their city by a foreign power. The resistance that was offered to the crusaders and Venetians was at best half-hearted. One French knight who participated in the day's fighting noted that as the crusaders sailed across from Chalcedon the Byzantine army on the other side of the strait did not wait for them to arrive or contest their landing but 'fell back and did not dare wait for them'. Similarly when on 17 July Alexios III led a large army out of the Land Walls to confront the crusaders who had set up camp there, it only needed the outnumbered Frenchmen to show willing to fight for the Byzantine army to beat an ignominious retreat. Clearly, few Byzantines were willing to risk their lives in a conflict between two members of the

Angelos family, neither of whom promised to be a much better emperor than the other. The strongest resistance to the attackers, therefore, came from English and Danish mercenaries and from the Pisan traders in Constantinople who were always happy to strike at their Venetian rivals.<sup>12</sup>

Alexios III was only too well aware of this and as the days went by he seems to have become increasingly anxious that, now that he no longer looked the firm bet that he had done a few weeks previously, the population might turn against him and he would suffer the same fate as Michael V or Andronicus I. He may have been further depressed by his humiliation outside the Land Walls on 17 July and by the fire which broke out close to the Sea Walls on the same day. This was deliberately started by some of the attacking troops to prevent the defenders from using the houses close to the walls as hiding places, and devastated a large area by the Sea Walls towards the Palace of Blachernae.<sup>13</sup> Alexios now took counsel with his eldest daughter and some of the female domestics in the palace. He gathered about 1,000 pounds of gold and a collection of imperial diadems and stole out of the Palace of Blachernae by night. He rode out of Constantinople to the town of Develton on the Thracian coast of the Black Sea, where he had already made arrangements for his reception.

Since Alexios had entrusted almost no one with his plans, the discovery of his absence from Blachernae on the morning of 18 July came as a surprise and a shock not only to the courtiers, but also to most members of his own family. After the initial consternation had died down, a eunuch called Constantine Philoxenites seized the initiative. He and his supporters assumed, wrongly, that the Empress Euphrosyne and other close associates of Alexios III must be party to some kind of plot and promptly ordered the Varangian guard to arrest them. Deeming the emperor to have forfeited his throne by his flight, Philoxenites had Alexios's blinded and imprisoned brother, Isaac II, brought up from the dungeons and placed once more on the imperial throne. Isaac immediately sent word to his son Alexios, who was still with the crusade fleet on the other side of the Golden Horn, inviting him to come into the city. In August 1203, Alexios was crowned as Alexios IV, to rule as co-emperor alongside his father.

That should have been the end of the matter. Another round of contention for the imperial throne had taken place and this time Isaac II and his son Alexios IV had emerged victorious. There followed the inevitable purges. Those who had abetted Alexios III in the coup of 1195 were hunted down and hanged. Known close associates of the runaway emperor among the courtiers and bureaucrats lost their jobs. Those who had been out of favour before 18 July now found that their fortunes had dramatically reversed. Among them was Alexios Doukas Mourtzouphlos who seems to have been released from prison, his part in the events of 1195 apparently forgotten in the light of his later break with Alexios III. It was probably now that Mourtzouphlos was able at last to marry Alexios III's daughter Eudokia. The new regime was not without its tensions. It soon became clear that Alexios IV was the real ruler of the empire and that Isaac II was being sidelined. Isaac resented his relegation but, blind and increasingly feeble as he was, there was little he could do. He contented himself with passing his days defaming his son to anyone who would listen and indulging in crude horseplay with some of the courtiers.<sup>14</sup> None of this was unusual, however. It was all part of the rhythm of Byzantine politics as they had been carried on for centuries.

Unfortunately, there was one outstanding piece of business that ensured that this particular dynastic struggle was to have tragic consequences for Constantinople. In order to secure the help of the crusaders in restoring his father to the throne, Alexios IV had rashly promised to pay them the sum of 200,000 silver marks as well as to supply provisions for every man in the army. Now that his allies had fulfilled their side of the bargain, he discovered that he would have some difficulty discharging his. The promised sum could not be raised immediately from the imperial treasury. Alexios handed over what he could and then sought to make up the shortfall by appropriating church goods, particularly the gold and silver frames of icons which he had melted down into coin.<sup>15</sup>

One could hardly imagine an action which would endear Alexios less to Byzantine public opinion. As word spread, resentment flared during the hot summer nights of July and August 1203 and the ever volatile Constantinopolitan mob took to the streets. It was not, however, against



Alexios IV himself that they vented their outrage but against Latins, regardless of whether they were associated with the crusading fleet or not, since they were blamed as the primary cause of Alexios's exactions. Those closest to hand were the Pisan and Amalfitan merchants who lived along the Golden Horn. Their houses and warehouses were attacked and burned to the ground and their occupants had to flee the city. The fury of the mob was even turned on inanimate objects. In one rampage the colossal bronze statue of Athena which stood at the edge of the Forum of Constantine was smashed because it was believed that the goddess's outstretched arm was beckoning the crusaders to attack the city.<sup>16</sup>

Further devastation was wreaked on the night of 19 August. A group of Pisans, Venetians and Frenchmen decided to make a raid across the Golden Horn on the mosque of the Mitaton, which stood just outside the Sea Walls, in the belief that the Arab merchants there had secret hoards of treasure. When the Arabs defended themselves against the onslaught, a crowd of local Byzantines came to their rescue. In the ensuing pitched battle the Latins were driven off, but they took revenge by setting alight some of the buildings round about. Fanned by a north wind, the fire spread quickly south into the city:

The flames divided, took many different directions and then came together again, meandering like a river of fire. Porticoes collapsed, the elegant structures of the market places toppled and huge columns went up in smoke like so much brushwood. Nothing could stand before those flames. Even more extraordinary was the fact that burning embers detached themselves from this roaring and raging fire and consumed buildings at a great distance. Shooting out at intervals, the embers darted through the sky, leaving a region untouched by the blaze, then destroying it when they turned back and fell upon it.<sup>17</sup>

Perama and the Venetian Embolo were quickly engulfed and the fire moved south at terrifying speed, passing quite close to Hagia Sophia and crossing the Mese and the Forum of Constantine. The southern end of the

Hippodrome was severely damaged and the flames reached the far side of the city where the Sea Walls overlooked the Sea of Marmara. Only after raging unchecked for a week did the fire finally die down.<sup>18</sup>

Faced with such anarchy, Alexios IV became increasingly concerned for his safety, warning his western allies that his people ‘hate me because of you; if you leave me, I shall lose my empire, and they will put me to death.’<sup>19</sup> He was right to be worried. By January 1204 the resentment of the people had reached fever pitch and they were openly criticizing the emperors Isaac II and Alexios IV in the streets. Opposition crystallized around two possible claimants to the throne. One was Nicholas Kannavos, a young man of no experience who was decidedly unwilling to don the purple. The other was Alexios Doukas Mourtzouphlos who had recently endeared himself to the people by daring to take on the crusaders in a skirmish just outside the Land Walls. It all worked itself out in typically Byzantine fashion. On the night of 27–28 January, Mourtzouphlos had Alexios IV seized and imprisoned, with Kannavos suffering the same fate shortly afterwards. Some weeks later, Alexios was strangled, after attempts to poison him proved unsuccessful. So shocking was the news of his son’s overthrow that Isaac II died too, leaving Mourtzouphlos sole emperor as Alexios V.<sup>20</sup>

Mourtzouphlos was not destined to enjoy supreme power for long. The crusaders were not prepared to accept the overthrow of the emperor that they had placed in power, especially as they knew that the new emperor had no intention of handing over the balance of the money promised by the previous incumbent. Their fleet was still anchored menacingly in the Golden Horn and their armies ranged unopposed outside the Land Walls. Mourtzouphlos, who was popular in Constantinople precisely because he was seen as a strong man who would stand up to the Latins, had to make a show of challenging them. Shortly after seizing power, Mourtzouphlos led a sally against the foraging force led by Henry of Flanders. The attack ended in disaster when the emperor found himself deserted by his troops and was forced to flee. The Latin troops even captured an icon of the Mother of God that Mourtzouphlos’s army had carried with it, a disaster which seemed to symbolize the withdrawal of the Virgin’s centuries-old protection of Constantinople.<sup>21</sup>

With hindsight, contemporaries were forced to conclude that that was exactly what had happened, for in April 1204 the army of the Fourth Crusade was to achieve what nobody else had to date and succeeded in taking Constantinople by storm. They were able to do so because they had already obtained a crucial advantage, that of bringing their fleet into the Golden Horn. From there, they could bring their ships close inshore and attack the Sea Walls which, unlike the Land Walls, were only one layer thick: there was no moat or outer wall to provide a first line of defence. The Venetians had equipped their ships very well for the task. They had constructed bridges that were lashed to the masts of their ships and projected forwards. These provided high platforms from which troops could jump between the battlements of the Sea Walls once the vessels were beached on the fore-shore of the Golden Horn directly in front of them.

After one failed attempt, the crusaders were assisted by a strong breeze which drove their vessels onto the shore. Two of them, the *Pilgrim* and the *Paradise*, were beached directly in front of a tower, allowing a number of men to leap onto it. A number of other towers were taken in the same way, while down at beach level the French knights were able to break open several of the gates and enter the city by that route.<sup>22</sup>

Even at this stage, the defenders might have beaten off the attack. A determined assault on the foothold gained by the crusaders might well have driven them back into the sea. Yet the people of Constantinople seem still to have believed that all that was happening was another change of ruler. Once the crusaders had gained a foothold on the Sea Walls, resistance appears to have petered out. Mourtzouphlos rode around the city streets, desperately urging the populace to rise up to repel the attack but he met only with apathy and indifference. Those who met the Latin troops as they cautiously advanced into the city tended to welcome them. Some shouted the name of Boniface, marquis of Montferrat, one of the leaders of the army, in the belief that he was to be the next emperor; others even formed processions with icons and crosses to welcome the conquerors who were, after all, their fellow Christians. Mourtzouphlos, realizing that he no longer had any support in the struggle, followed in the footsteps of Alexios III

and fled through the Golden Gate out into the Thracian countryside, taking the ex-empress Euphrosyne and his wife Eudokia with him.<sup>23</sup>

Only once the city was captured did it become clear what had actually happened: that Constantinople, after remaining inviolate for centuries, had finally been delivered into the hands of a hostile and ruthless foreign power. Following its capture on 12 April 1204, it was subjected to several days of pillage by the victorious troops on a scale never experienced before. Naturally the palaces of the wealthy were an obvious target and were stripped of any gold and silver objects, furniture, furs and silks.<sup>24</sup> More controversially, the victors, in spite of being crusaders under oath to fight for the Christian faith, treated many of Constantinople's churches in the same way. A crowd of them entered Hagia Sophia to remove the gold and silver candlesticks and ecclesiastical vessels, including a huge ciborium that weighed thousands of pounds. So numerous and heavy were these objects that they had to bring donkeys and mules into the cathedral to carry them all away. Another group went to the church of the Holy Apostles and burst into the Heroön, the mausoleum where the emperors of the past lay buried. They opened the tomb of the Emperor Justinian and found that his corpse was miraculously uncorrupted after over 600 years. Consequently, they left it alone, but they stripped off anything of value from the sarcophagus. The tomb of Romanos III in the church of the Virgin Peribleptos suffered a similar fate, as did the church of the monastery of Christ Pantokrator, the burial place of Manuel I and John II. Eyewitnesses were astonished at the sheer amount of booty that was seized, estimated by one of them to be greater than anything that had ever been taken from any city since the creation of the world.<sup>25</sup>

Much of what was seized in Constantinople in April 1204 was carted back to the West by returning soldiers and some of it still survives today. Some returning crusaders piously presented various precious objects that they had stolen to their local churches. When the German crusader Heinrich von Ülmgen got back to Hesse in 1207 he presented the nunnery of Stuben with a silver-gilt, enamelled reliquary, designed to hold a portion of the True Cross. Made in about 964 or 965 at the command of the eunuch Basil Lekapenos the *Parakoimomenos*, it

must almost certainly have come from either Hagia Sophia or the Great Palace. It is now housed in the cathedral of Limburg-an-der-Lahn. A crystal cross reliquary presented by Robert of Clari to the monastery of Corbie in Picardy was possibly taken from the chapel of the Holy Virgin of Pharos. Many similar objects found their way back to Flanders, sent back by the Flemish emperors who were to rule Constantinople after 1204.<sup>26</sup> The greatest haul of looted objects, however, ended up in Venice. The treasury of the church of St Mark there boasts jewelled chalices, reliquaries, enamelled book covers, gold-framed icons and silver patens, magnificent examples of Byzantine ecclesiastical gold and silverware.<sup>27</sup>

It was not, however, just the sack and looting of April 1204 which caused lasting damage to Byzantine Constantinople. The tragedy in this case was that the regime which now came to power in Constantinople and which ruled there for fifty-seven years, had neither the wherewithal nor the desire to repair the damage done in 1204. This was the so-called Latin Empire of Constantinople.

A peculiar hybrid of western feudalism and Byzantine political thought, the Latin empire came into being when, with the looting over, the conquerors moved to legitimize their position. They implemented a pact which had been made between the Venetians and the crusaders in March 1204, shortly before the final attack, which provided for the replacement of the Byzantine ruling hierarchy with a Latin one. An electoral council of six Venetians and six Frenchmen was to elect a new emperor from among the crusader leadership. The choice fell on Baldwin, count of Flanders, who was crowned in Hagia Sophia by Bishop Nivelon of Soissons on 16 May 1204.<sup>28</sup>

Baldwin I initiated a series of rulers whose hold on power was precarious even compared to their Byzantine predecessors'. The first Latin emperor reigned less than a year before being captured by Kalojan's Bulgarians in a skirmish near Adrianople in April 1205. Dragged off to a dungeon in Trnovo, according to Niketas Choniates, he suffered the indignity of having his arms and legs lopped off and being thrown into a ravine where he lingered for three days. Whether this was true or merely wishful thinking, Baldwin was never seen again by his comrades in Constantinople.<sup>29</sup>

When it was clear that Baldwin was not coming back, his brother Henry, who had been acting as regent, was elected emperor. His reign (1206–16) proved to be the only period during which the Latin empire enjoyed effective government, with external enemies being driven back and much being done to reconcile the population of Constantinople to Latin rule. Even a Byzantine was prepared to admit that Henry ‘behaved quite graciously’ to the inhabitants of the city.<sup>30</sup> After Henry’s death, however, matters reverted to the previous chaos. His successor, his brother-in-law Peter of Courtenay, was crowned in Rome in April 1217. He then sailed across the Adriatic with the intention of marching overland to Constantinople. On the way, his army was surrounded and forced to surrender by the Greek ruler of Epiros, Theodore Angelos. Peter, like Baldwin, disappeared into captivity and was never seen again.

For the next two years, Peter’s wife Yolanda held the fort as regent in Constantinople until a new emperor finally arrived in the person of her son Robert of Courtenay (1221–8). The elder son, Philip of Namur, had very wisely declined this dubious honour. The new emperor soon succeeded in undoing all the achievements of Henry I, alienating his Byzantine subjects and, thanks to inept diplomacy, uniting his external enemies. He even fell out with his own French knights, who were so outraged by his marrying a woman of humble origins that they invaded his bedchamber in the Great Palace one night and dragged her from his bed. Robert fled to Rome and although the pope persuaded him to return to Constantinople, he died on the way back. The last Latin emperor was Baldwin II (1228–61) who was only eleven years old when he succeeded so that a succession of regents ran the empire until 1237. Even when he was old enough to rule, Baldwin spent little time in Constantinople, preferring to travel west to seek favours from his relatives in France, Flanders and England.<sup>31</sup>

Instability and incompetence at the top, however, was only part of the problem with the Latin empire. The seeds of its weakness had been sown at the time of its inception, when the Venetians and the crusaders had made a pact dividing up the Byzantine empire between them. The treaty had only assigned to the Latin emperor a fraction of the territories that his Byzantine predecessor had enjoyed, and he had not

succeeded even in subduing all of these. The rest went to the Venetians, or else was parcelled out as fiefs among western knights. As a result, the Latin emperor was unable to bring in the substantial receipts from the Land Tax that his Byzantine predecessors had enjoyed.<sup>32</sup>

The Byzantine emperors had had another source of income in the *Kommerkion*, the 10 per cent levy on all imports and exports into the city. That too was denied to the Latin emperors, for the city's trade was now largely, though not entirely, in the hands of the Venetians whose Embolo on the Golden Horn had been hugely expanded and who enjoyed complete immunity from the *Kommerkion*. One might have thought that the Latin emperors would nevertheless still be able to profit from Constantinople's burgeoning trade, perhaps by taxing markets in the city where imported goods were sold. Unfortunately it would seem that, as the thirteenth century progressed, Constantinople's trade went into steep decline. This may have been partly because the disappearance of the Byzantine court and bureaucracy robbed merchants of a lucrative market for luxury goods. It might also have been the result of the devastation of the area to the north of the Black Sea – which had once been a source of furs, wax and amber and a market for exported goods – when the Mongol armies of Genghis Khan swept in during 1221 and 1222. Whatever the precise reason, by 1250 Constantinople was no longer the thriving commercial metropolis that it had once been and Venetian merchants seem to have been losing interest in acquiring property there. Consequently, its rulers could no longer use the trade to fill their coffers.<sup>33</sup>

To make ends meet, the Latin emperors resorted to a variety of methods. Baldwin II toured the West begging for money from his relatives and mortgaging his family's ancestral lands there. When he was particularly hard up in 1248, he even pledged his son, Philip, to some Venetian merchants as security on a loan of 24,000 hyperpera. The luckless Philip had to remain in Venice as a virtual hostage for some thirteen years.<sup>34</sup>

There was, however, another way for the Latin emperors to raise cash which did not require a trip to western Europe and that was to milk their main asset, Constantinople, of anything of value. One of Constantinople's prime assets was relics of the saints. Several thousand

of them are known to have existed, scattered throughout the numerous churches of the city. To the newly arrived Latin conquerors, especially the priests among them, these relics were the object of avid desire. Quite apart from their intrinsic spiritual value, the possession of a major relic by a church, monastery or cathedral in western Europe would bring pilgrims, and their money, flooding in. Consequently, there was no shortage of individuals ready to go to any lengths to secure such a relic in Constantinople for their home church. An English priest allegedly stole a piece of the True Cross and took it back to the priory of Bromholm in Norfolk. Bishop Garnier of Troyes sent the head of St Philip back to his home diocese, to be followed shortly after by the relics of St Helen the Virgin. Abbot Martin of Pairis purloined 'a not inconsiderable piece of St John' in addition to a number of other items.<sup>35</sup>

No doubt many of these relics were of dubious provenance and passed off on gullible clerics, over-eager to enhance the reputation of their home church. The Latin emperors, however, had an unrivalled source to exploit, the collection housed in the chapel of the Holy Virgin of Pharos within the Great Palace. This had remained largely intact after the city fell, although Nivelon, bishop of Soissons, one of the most senior clerics to accompany the Venetian fleet to Constantinople, helped himself to a thorn from the Crown of Thorns, a fragment of the robe of the Virgin Mary and other items which he sent back as a gift to his own diocese.<sup>36</sup>

It was the defeat of the Latin emperor Baldwin I at Adrianople in April 1205 which provided the catalyst for the wholesale exploitation of the Pharos relic collection. Hoping to bring help to the now beleaguered Latin regime, Nivelon of Soissons left Constantinople for the West, taking with him a number of important relics from the Pharos chapel, including the head of John the Baptist. They were probably taken either to give authority to his appeal or to be sold to raise money for troops and supplies. In the end they provided neither, nor did they ever return to Constantinople. Nivelon died when he had only got as far as Apulia in southern Italy, and in his deathbed will he arranged for the relics to be distributed among a number of churches in France. The elbow of St Stephen went to Châlons-sur-Marne, while the Baptist's head ended up in the cathedral of Soissons.<sup>37</sup>



The pattern was set for the future. In 1208, Henry I sent a collection of relics to western Europe to be sold. In 1237, Baldwin II pawned the Crown of Thorns and other relics of the Passion to a Venetian merchant for 13,134 hyperpera. The True Cross suffered the indignity of having bits broken off it to be sold separately, though parts of it remained in Constantinople long after the end of the Latin empire. The other famous relic from the chapel, however, the Mandyion of Edessa, seems to have disappeared without trace.<sup>38</sup> In this way, one of the pillars of Constantinople's reputation as a holy city and pilgrimage site was broken up and lost for ever.

The pilfering of relics and other treasures, damaging though it was to Constantinople's prestige, made little impact on the physical appearance of the city. Moreover, not everything was taken. The famous icon of the Hodegetria, which one might have expected to have been sold off with everything else, remained in Constantinople throughout the period of the Latin empire, housed in the church of the monastery of the Pantokrator.<sup>39</sup> More damaging as far as appearances were concerned was another of the money-making activities of the Latins. Ever since its foundation, a prominent feature of the city had been the antique bronze statues that Constantine and his successors had brought from all over the empire to beautify the new foundation. Their aesthetic qualities were, however, lost on those whom Niketas Choniates labelled 'these barbarians, haters of the beautiful'. Rather they saw them as a source of metal to be made into coins. One by one the statues were dismantled and melted down in furnaces. One of the first to go, no doubt because it was one of the largest, was the colossal statue of the goddess Hera in the Forum of Constantine, which was pulled down and broken up, a team of eight oxen being called in to drag away the enormous head. The Anemodoulion, the rather eccentric weathervane which stood in the Augousteion, suffered the same fate. The statues that lined the Hippodrome were also removed. Lysippos of Sicyon's Hercules, the Calydonian boar, statues of victorious charioteers of the past and countless other priceless masterpieces all went into the furnace.<sup>40</sup>

Some were spared destruction to be taken away as trophies. The four bronze horses, symbols of the chariot races that had taken place in the

Hippodrome over the centuries, were appropriated by the Venetians and shipped off to become ornaments on the façade of Saint Mark's church. A few were left in place. The serpent column from Delphi was one of them, perhaps because it served a more practical purpose as a drinking fountain, and there were some others that survived and which are attested in later centuries.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the conquerors of 1204 largely annihilated one of the curious and striking aspects of the city within a few short years.

The ransacking of Constantinople did not end with the bronze statues. In their ceaseless search for something to sell, the Latin emperors went so far as to have the copper and lead stripped from the roofs of buildings, including those of their own residence, the Great Palace, and then to sell it for scrap. The emperors were not the only culprits here. The Latin patriarch of Constantinople, Matthew of Jesolo (1221–6), did much the same, targeting the roofs of the churches of Constantinople.<sup>42</sup> With their roofs gone, the churches inevitably fell into ruin. Sometimes the damage done to the churches was for liturgical rather than financial reasons. The western Church used a different liturgy and ceremonial from the Orthodox Church of the Byzantine empire, so changes were made in those churches and monasteries that were taken over by Latin clergy. In the chapel of the St Sampson Hospital the iconostasis, the screen which stood between the altar and the congregation, was taken out and according to one report used as a latrine cover for the patients.<sup>43</sup>

The greatest damage, however, did not come about through Latin greed or vandalism but simply as a consequence of there no longer being the resources available to maintain the enormous heritage of fine buildings. Many of them just fell into ruin through lack of routine repairs. The church of St John the Theologian in Hebdomon was in such a bad condition by 1260 that it was being used as a stable. Even the Great Palace, the residence of the Latin emperors, was in a state of decay. It had been damaged by stones hurled over the walls by Latin catapults during the sieges of 1203 and 1204 and the damage had never been made good. Inside, the mosaic decoration on the ceilings and walls became blackened with soot from the smoky lamps and fires

used to light and warm the place. Even the figures on the pediments of columns somehow got smashed.<sup>44</sup>

By contrast, there is virtually no evidence of anything being created or built under the Latin regime. There are some surviving frescoes depicting the life of St Francis of Assisi in the church of the Virgin Kyriotissa and it would seem that Emperor Henry I ordered the building of a church in honour of an Icelandic saint, Thorlac. Some work may have been done to buttress the walls of Hagia Sophia.<sup>45</sup> That, however, was as far as it went.

Consequently by 1261, Constantinople was in a sorry state, 'a plain of desolation', as one later observer put it, 'full of ruins ... with houses razed to the ground and a few buildings which had survived the great fire'. The damage caused by the three fires which had raged in the city during 1203 and 1204 had largely been left. One contemporary reckoned that more houses had burned down as a result of these fires than existed in the whole of France, and even a sober modern commentator has estimated that between one-third and one-sixth of the city was burned down. Hence the remark of Niketas Choniates that Constantinople had been 'laid waste by fire and blackened by soot, taken and emptied of all wealth' was still the case over fifty years after the sack.<sup>46</sup> Yet the city had known war, fire and depopulation in the past, particularly in the dark days of the seventh and eighth centuries, and it had recovered. Even the immense damage caused by the Nika Riot of 532 had been repaired within fifty years. There was every reason to expect that it would once more rise from the ashes.

## CHAPTER 9

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# *The Ruin of Byzantine Constantinople*

While the Latins had been busy stripping Constantinople of all its moveable assets, its two runaway former rulers had had little success in staging a political comeback. Mourtzouphlos, the short-reigned Alexios V, having escaped from the stricken city with the ex-empress Euphrosyne and his wife Eudokia in April 1204, travelled through Thrace until he reached Mosynopolis. He had heard that the other refugee emperor, Alexios III Angelos, was residing in the town and hoped that he might be received favourably. After all, although the two men had had their differences in the past, Mourtzouphlos was delivering Alexios's wife and daughter safe and sound and, having married Eudokia, he could now present himself as Alexios's son-in-law.

Eudokia's father certainly extended an affable welcome to the new arrivals, but family ties stood for little in the world of Byzantine politics. Constantinople may have fallen, but the business of making and unmaking emperors went on as usual. Alexios III had no intention of allowing a rival to remain at large, and so he artfully invited Mourtzouphlos and Eudokia to refresh themselves after their long journey and take a bath. On Alexios's orders, armed men then burst into the bath house, seized Mourtzouphlos and blinded him there and then, while Eudokia cowered in one of the window bays, screaming hysterically. Since he no longer presented a threat, the now sightless Mourtzouphlos was turned out of Mosynopolis and left to wander across Thrace as best he could. Before long he was picked up by some French knights led by Thierry of Loos who took him back to Constantinople.

After some debate among Emperor Baldwin and other leaders of the Fourth Crusade as to a fitting punishment for the man who had defied them and murdered their protégé, Alexios IV, they decided to dispose of him in spectacular fashion. In October 1204, he was taken to the top of one of the highest columns in the city, that of Theodosius, and, in front of a huge crowd of onlookers, was then hurled to his death on the flagstones below.<sup>1</sup>

Alexios III profited little from his treachery. When he heard that a Latin army was approaching, he left Mosynopolis with Euphrosyne and Eudokia and began a series of wanderings around the former territories of his empire. Arriving in Thessalonica, the fugitives were welcomed by Margaret of Hungary, the widow of Isaac II who does not seem to have borne a grudge for Alexios's treatment of her husband. Alexios, however, was incapable of refraining from intrigue and when his plots were uncovered he and his family were told to leave Thessalonica. They moved on to Corinth where Alexios disposed of Eudokia by marrying her to Leo Sgouros, a local magnate who had set himself up as ruler of the town. From there, Alexios and Euphrosyne tried to travel to Ioannina in Epiros where a cousin of Alexios, Michael Angelos, was holding power. They very nearly did not make it. Some Latin soldiers took them prisoner on the way and they were only released when Michael Angelos paid a substantial ransom demand.

Alexios did not stay in Ioannina for long. He seems to have developed a restless urge to keep travelling in the vague hope that one day he would be restored to the Great Palace in Constantinople. He and Euphrosyne seem at one point to have travelled to Germany, perhaps in the hope of enlisting help in the way their nephew had. Finally, Alexios left Euphrosyne behind in Epiros and set off alone. The couple were never to meet again, Euphrosyne dying in the town of Arta a few years later. By that time Alexios was far away, in Konya in Asia Minor, the capital of the Seljuk Turks and residence of their sultan, Kaikosru I (1192–6, 1204–11). Alexios clearly intended to call in a favour. In the later 1190s, when Kaikosru had been ousted from power by his brother Rukn al-Din, the sultan had fled to Constantinople and had been hospitably enough received by Alexios III, though the help that he hoped to receive in toppling Rukn al-Din was not forthcoming.

Now the roles were reversed, for Kaikosru was once more settled in power in Konya and it was Alexios who was the homeless refugee.<sup>2</sup>

If Alexios hoped for assistance in recovering Constantinople from the Latins, he was disappointed. Kaikosru was far too cautious to strike out across the disputed lands of north-western Asia Minor to take on a foe as formidable as Henry of Flanders. Instead, he prepared to mount an attack on Alexios's son-in-law, Theodore Laskaris, whose lands bordered the sultanate of Konya to the south-west. Following the sack of Constantinople, Laskaris had escaped to Nicaea where he had set up a kind of Byzantine government in exile. In 1208, Laskaris had himself crowned emperor, thus staking his claim to the lost capital city and, by implication, negating Alexios III's title to the throne. In 1211 Alexios accompanied a Turkish army as it invaded Laskaris's territory. For a time, it looked as if the invaders were likely to prevail in a battle fought around Antioch on the Meander. At the height of the battle, however, Theodore Laskaris came face to face with Kaikosru and killed him in single combat. The Turks retreated, leaving the hapless Alexios behind. Taken prisoner, he was sent by Laskaris to a monastery at Nicaea. One can almost picture him there, forgotten and unloved, passing the long days in reflection on his own chequered career, from his stay as a refugee from the tyranny of Andronicus Komnenos at the court of Saladin, through his seizure of power and eight years as emperor to the time when he was a wanderer once more. Perhaps he even paused to consider the part he had played in bringing Constantinople to the sad situation it was now in.

Of all the Constantinopolitan elite of the period before 1204, therefore, it was Theodore Laskaris who prospered. His son-in-law and successor, John III Vatatzes (1222–54) went on to defeat the forces of the Latin empire of Constantinople at Poimamenon in 1225 and reoccupy lost imperial territories in Asia Minor and the Balkans. In the event, however, it was not the Laskaris family who were to have the honour of regaining Constantinople from the increasingly fragile Latin regime there. In 1258, a child of seven, John IV Laskaris, inherited the throne in Nicaea, a situation always fraught with danger in Byzantine politics. Within a short time, power was seized by one of the ablest and

most ruthless generals, Michael Palaiologos, who was appointed as regent after probably having had the previous regent murdered during a church service. Once he was secure in power, the regent had himself crowned emperor as Michael VIII (1259–82) and had his young charge sidelined and later imprisoned. His dynasty was destined to rule Byzantine Constantinople for the rest of its existence as a Christian city.

Michael could, however, claim little credit for the recovery of the capital which took place almost by accident. In July 1261 one of his generals, Alexios Strategopoulos, was in Thrace with his army, close to the Land Walls. Information was conveyed to him from inside the city that it was virtually undefended, much of the Latin garrison having gone off to attack a nearby island. News also came that one of the small gates in the walls had been left open. On the night of 25 July some fifteen men crept in through this opening and after pitching the sentry over the walls, opened one of the main gates to Strategopoulos's troops. Their appearance in the street came as a complete surprise. Men rushed to the monasteries to take sanctuary and women hid in doorways and alleyways as the soldiers rushed past. In the Venetian quarter, houses were set on fire, but there was no wholesale massacre of Latins as might have been expected. The few who were still in the city, including Emperor Baldwin II, realized that the situation was hopeless and made for the nearest ship. By dawn, Constantinople was once more in Byzantine hands.<sup>3</sup>

Michael VIII was on the Asian side of the Bosphorus with another part of the army when the news of the capture of Constantinople arrived. It was very early in the morning and the emperor was still asleep in his tent. The news was given to Michael's sister Eulogia, who went into the emperor's tent to pass it on. The emperor proved to be a very heavy sleeper and only by pulling his big toe and tickling his feet with a feather did Eulogia succeed in waking him and telling him what had happened. At first Michael did not believe it, but then a messenger arrived bringing the crown and sceptre of the Latin emperor, which Baldwin II had left behind in his rush to escape.<sup>4</sup>

On 15 August, the Feast of the Dormition of the Virgin, the patron and protector of Constantinople, Michael VIII made his ceremonial entry into the city, processing through the Golden Gate. According

to custom, the emperor followed behind a chariot at the front of the procession. In the chariot was placed the famous icon of the Hodegetria which had been found safe and sound in the church of the Pantokrator. It was an acknowledgement that the triumph, like the preservation of Constantinople in the past, was the result of the Virgin's intervention, and hence the choice of day for Michael's entry. At the monastery of Stoudios, the icon was reverently placed in the church and the emperor then mounted his horse and rode along the Triumphal Way and the Mese towards the Augousteion, to the cheers of the crowds that lined the road, to take up residence in the Great Palace.<sup>5</sup>

Shrewd political operator that he was, Michael VIII was well aware of how hugely beneficial this spectacular coup was for his own position. He now felt strong enough to order the blinding of the young John Laskaris, who was still only a child, and to have him immured in a castle on the Sea of Marmara. Even by the standards of Byzantine political life, this was an atrocious crime, and Michael was swiftly excommunicated for it by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Arsenios. Typically, Michael responded by dethroning Arsenios and replacing him with someone more pliant who promptly lifted the excommunication. Still, the emperor was not unaware of the damage that his actions had done to his public image. He may have remembered the fate of his predecessor Michael V when he had tried to thrust aside the legitimate empress Zoe.<sup>6</sup>

Michael had therefore to try even harder to prove himself a worthy Roman emperor, and one way to do that was to restore the city of Constantinople to its former glory. In doing so, Michael could claim to be following in the footsteps of the greatest emperor of them all, Constantine, who had founded the city in the first place. Indeed, it would seem that he liked to think of himself as a new Constantine, because he had restored what Constantine had created. Almost as soon as he was in control of the city, Michael began an intensive series of building works. First and foremost, the Sea Walls along the Golden Horn were raised to prevent a repetition of the tactics used by the Latins in April 1204. The Blachernae palace was refurbished and decorated not with the traditional mosaics but with frescoes, painted onto plaster, celebrating Michael's many victories. This may well have been an economy measure



as fresco is considerably cheaper than mosaic and Michael could not afford to be too lavish in view of all that remained to be done. Streets and porticoes were repaired and schools and hospitals founded. To make the point clear, Michael went so far as to set up a column outside the church of the Holy Apostles. On top of the column was a statue of Saint Michael and before him knelt the figure of an emperor, presenting the Archangel with a model of the city. The emperor depicted could, of course, have been either Constantine or Michael himself.<sup>7</sup>

Michael was also assiduous in that other imperial duty, the founding and beautification of churches and monasteries. Hagia Sophia received new communion vessels and altar cloths and probably a new mosaic of the *Deesis*, a figure of Christ between the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. Other churches received new roofs of tiles or lead and new furnishings to replace those stolen by the Latins. The monastery of St Demetrius, which had been founded by a member of the Palaiologos family in the past, was refounded and restored.<sup>8</sup>

All this restoration activity seems to have paid off. Michael VIII was able to persuade the people of Constantinople to accept him and his family as the legitimate imperial dynasty and to forgive the murky path he had followed to reach the throne. A measure of his success was that when he died in 1282 he was succeeded by his twenty-four-year-old son Andronicus II (1282–1328) without any upheaval or bloodshed. No one was murdered, no one was blinded and Andronicus was even safe enough to make a visit to John Laskaris in his castle and to try to assuage his conscience by providing for the comfort of the prisoner. It would even appear that when Laskaris died his body was brought to Constantinople for burial in the Palaiologos family's favourite monastery, St Demetrius.<sup>9</sup> A very different man from his father, Andronicus was renowned for his piety and for his patronage of learning and scholarship. He liked to preside over gatherings where literary and philosophical subjects were discussed, and contemporaries likened his court to the Stoa of ancient Athens.

The process of restoration that had begun under Michael continued under Andronicus. The monastery of Virgin Tou Libos which had originally been founded in the tenth century was refurbished and became the next burial place for members of the imperial family.<sup>10</sup> It was also a

time when not only the emperor but also his wealthier magnates were happy to spend their money in restoring a decayed church or building a new one. The church of the All-Blessed Virgin (Pammakaristos) was refurbished by a successful general named Michael Glabas, and after his death in 1304 his widow converted the south aisle into a side chapel in his memory.<sup>11</sup>

The most prominent of the patrons at this time was Theodore Metochites (1270–1332), chief minister of Andronicus II in the latter part of his reign. Metochites was both a statesman and a scholar, a prominent member of the emperor's literary circle as well as a powerful personality who dominated the court. His pupil Nikephoros Gregoras gives this description of him:

By the size of his body, the harmony of its limbs and other features, and by the brightness of his eyes he drew all eyes upon himself. In his natural ability as a speaker, his capacity for work, strength of memory and clear understanding of all branches of knowledge he achieved great heights. He was so fluent in replying to all questions, whether about antiquity or the present day, as if his tongue were a book, that his friends had little or no need of books. For he was a living library and a ready store of information, far excelling all previous men of learning ... The most remarkable fact about him was that, while public affairs were in such a state of confusion, with the impending storm and a whole series of responsibilities continually flooding into his mind, nothing ever prevented him from reading and writing. So skilled was he in both spheres of activity that he could work from early morning until evening in the palace, entirely devoted to the administration of public business and dispatching it with great enthusiasm, as if he had no literary interests at all. Leaving the palace late he would then devote himself completely to reading, as if he were a scholar entirely detached from public life.<sup>12</sup>

Metochites amassed a considerable fortune through his tenure of office, though some said, probably rightly, that much of it was achieved through selling of offices and pocketing of bribes. He expended a good deal of his wealth on a magnificent new palace for himself and his family, complete with marble floors, gardens, piped water, baths and porticoed courtyard.<sup>13</sup> He was, however, also the patron and protector of the monastery and church of Holy Saviour in Chora, which lay close to the Land Walls and the Palace of Blachernae. He provided the monastery with a library which became the largest in Constantinople, while its church was rebuilt between 1316 and 1321 and given lavish new mosaic decoration depicting the lives of Christ and the Virgin. Metochites also built a side chapel to house his own tomb and decorated it most appropriately with frescoes depicting the Last Judgement.<sup>14</sup>

So it was that, thanks to the efforts of Michael VIII, Andronicus II, Metochites, Glabas and others, much had been done to restore Constantinople to its pre-1204 state. The city was once more a place of wonder and pilgrimage. The Byzantines had even succeeded in putting together another collection of relics of the passion to replace those taken by the Latins, including the sponge soaked in vinegar that was offered to Christ and the reed that he was forced to hold, as well as part of the by-now much divided True Cross. These were now normally kept in the monastery of St George of Mangana but they were publicly displayed in Hagia Sophia during holy week. Western travellers were surprised to see the Crown of Thorns among them as that was supposedly in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris after having been acquired by the king of France who had paid off the debt to the Venetians when it had been pawned by Baldwin II. Most, however, asked no questions and were content to accept the mystique, one fourteenth-century Russian visitor exclaiming that 'There is much that amazes one there, which the human mind cannot express'.<sup>15</sup> It was almost as if nothing had changed, which is certainly what the Byzantines wanted outsiders to think. Unfortunately, things were by no means what they had been.

The root of the problem was that the empire that Michael VIII had reconstituted in 1261 was a great deal smaller than that ruled over by Alexios III Angelos in 1200. It consisted only of about a third of Asia

Minor, a strip of territory across the Balkans, part of the Peloponnese and some of the Aegean islands, and this shrinkage of territory meant that the Palaiologan emperors received only a fraction of the tax receipts that their predecessors had enjoyed. The other source of revenue, customs duties, was also in decline, as much of Constantinople's trade was now firmly in the hands of the Venetians and Genoese, who did not pay the *Kommerkion*. It was estimated that by the mid-fourteenth century the Genoese earned 200,000 gold pieces in duties a year, by diverting trade through their new commercial quarter in Galata across the Golden Horn, while the Byzantine treasury received a mere 30,000. By contrast, in the sixth century, when Justinian had built so many of Constantinople's great buildings, the empire had enjoyed an annual revenue of about five or six million gold pieces a year, but that had now shrunk to one million hyperpyra, and these coins were of lower value because they had a much smaller gold content than the old solidus of Justinian's day.<sup>16</sup> All this meant that the emperors no longer had the means to lavish large sums on beautifying their capital city and it explains why private individuals such as Theodore Metochites and Michael Glabas were now more prominent as patrons.

Things got worse from the 1280s on, as the empire shrank still further. Conscious of the threat of an expedition from western Europe to reconquer Constantinople after 1261, Michael VIII had concentrated most of the imperial forces in the western part of the empire. The eastern frontier appeared to be less vulnerable, as the emperor had a long-standing peace treaty with the Seljuk sultan in Konya. This took no account, however, of the semi-independent bands of nomadic Turks who owed little allegiance to the increasingly feeble sultanate and who therefore felt themselves bound by no treaty. They began to raid over the border into Byzantine territory and, when they encountered almost no opposition, began to settle there. Andronicus II saw the danger and led an army into Asia Minor in 1290, but following two serious reverses at Magnesia and Bapheon in 1302, the Byzantine armies withdrew, leaving the Turks to conquer the area unmolested. By 1330, the whole of Asia Minor was lost, apart from a few towns which still held out.<sup>17</sup> The extent of the disaster could hardly be concealed from the people of Constantinople. As a passing Catalan mercenary observed:

The Turks had, in truth, conquered so much territory, that their armies arrived in battle array before Constantinople; and only an arm of sea, less than two miles wide separated them from the city as they brandished their swords and threatened the emperor, who could see it all. Imagine the torment he must have felt, for they would have seized Constantinople itself had they possessed the means by which to cross that arm of sea.

Nor could they ignore the crowds of refugees that daily arrived in Constantinople from the conquered provinces. Many were completely destitute and were forced to live in squalor on the city's rubbish dumps.<sup>18</sup>

In the face of the disaster, opposition to the rule of the ageing Andronicus II and his chief minister Metochites grew ever more strident, and gathered around the person of his youthful grandson, also named Andronicus. In May 1328, young Andronicus and his supporters forced their way into Constantinople and compelled the old emperor to abdicate. With his patron gone, Metochites too fell from power. A mob attacked his mansion near the Chora monastery and, having stripped it of anything of value, razed it to the ground. Even the marble pavement was prised up and sent off as a gift to a foreign ruler.<sup>19</sup> Metochites himself was banished to the town of Didymoteichon in Thrace where he was forced to endure harsh conditions, in contrast to the wealth and luxury that he had once enjoyed, and, worst of all, absence from the centre of civilization, the Great City. He was therefore profoundly grateful when a charitable monk took pity on him and sent him a case of wine:

The fact is that nothing pleasant or useful comes to me from here, either in illness or in health, either when it comes to drinks or comestibles. This is especially true whenever, following the Christian way of life, I abstain from meat and am obliged to turn to a fish diet ... As you know, local inhabitants are very

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far removed from the sea and whatever is caught in the local rivers is utterly useless, unpleasant and tasteless to me ... For it is clear how difficult my present circumstances are, how hard my present experience is, and how different from all my former way of life; and you showed yourself both as a noble and useful person, when I was precisely in most urgent need to have the indispensable use of wine.<sup>20</sup>

After two years in Thrace, Metochites was allowed to return to Constantinople and to take up residence in his monastery of the Chora. His last days were sad, troubled by illness and by the view from his window which looked out on the spot where his house had once stood. He died on 13 March 1332, one month after his former master, Andronicus II.

The accession of the young and vigorous Andronicus III (1328–41) seemed to open a new era and promise recovery from the depressing decline under his predecessor. Realizing that there was no hope of recovering Asia Minor for the time being, the new emperor made peace with the Turks but he was successful in recovering a swathe of lost territory in the western half of the empire. The recovery was to be short-lived, however, for in June 1341 Andronicus died, aged only forty-five. His son and heir, John, was only nine years old and the inevitable result was civil war as Andronicus's right-hand man John Kantakouzenos fought for power with the empress-mother Anna of Savoy and the patriarch of Constantinople who were acting as regents for the young emperor. Civil wars such as this were not uncommon in Byzantium, and indeed in the whole medieval world, but this one was particularly destructive. It raged for six years and effectively bankrupted the empire. Even the crown jewels had to be pawned by Anna of Savoy to pay for troops, and when Kantakouzenos finally won and had himself crowned as John VI (1347–54) he discovered that there was no gold or silver plate for the coronation banquet, as it had all long since been sold.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps realizing the damage that his ambitions had done to the empire, the new emperor refrained from taking

bloody reprisals against his defeated enemies. After seven years in power, he abdicated and handed power back to John V Palaiologos. The former emperor changed his name to Joseph and took monastic vows, spending the rest of his life writing theological tracts and his own political memoirs.

As well as ruining the empire financially, the civil war of 1341–7 also led to the loss of most of its territory. Neighbouring rulers took advantage of the Byzantines' preoccupation with fighting each other to take over large tracts of imperial territory, the king of Serbia, Stefan Dushan (1331–55), helping himself to most of Thessaly and Macedonia. More serious in the long term, however, were the actions of a group of Turks known as the Osmanlis or Ottomans, who ruled the north-western section of Asia Minor. After having fought alongside John Kantakouzenos in the civil war, the Ottomans seized first Tzympe, on the European side of the Bosphorus, and then in 1354 the town of Gallipoli. From this bridgehead, the Turks began the systematic conquest of Thrace, taking Adrianople in about 1369 and laying the foundations of the future Ottoman empire. By 1400, Constantinople was reduced to an isolated outpost in the midst of territory dominated by the Ottomans.<sup>22</sup>

The dramatic decline in the fortunes of the Byzantine empire was reflected in the appearance of Constantinople. With the emperor bankrupt, the restoration programme that had begun during the reigns of the first two emperors of the Palaiologos family ground to a halt. Many of the great buildings of the city could no longer be maintained, something that was only too apparent to visitors. Ruy Gonzalez Clavijo, a Spanish diplomat who passed through in 1403, commented that:

Everywhere throughout the city, there are many great palaces, churches and monasteries but most of them are now in ruin. It is plain, however, that in former times, when Constantinople was in its pristine state, it was one of the noblest capitals in the world.<sup>23</sup>

Even the Great Palace was in a ramshackle state, according to another visitor:

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The emperor's palace must have been very magnificent, but now it is in such a state that both it and the city show well the evils which the people have suffered and still endure ... Inside, the house is badly kept, except for certain parts where the emperor, the empress, and attendants can live, although cramped for space. The emperor's state is as splendid as ever, for nothing is omitted from the ancient ceremonies, but, properly regarded, he is like a bishop without a see.<sup>24</sup>

The cathedral of Hagia Sophia remained as splendid as ever, though many of its doors were permanently blocked up due to lack of money, and when repairs were needed the Byzantine government had to petition the ruler of Novgorod to send donations.<sup>25</sup> Even the orb had fallen from the hand of the great statue of Justinian that stood outside the cathedral, to which one visitor attached heavy significance:

And it is said there that the fall of the apple is a token that the emperor has lost a great part of his lordship. For he used to be emperor of Romania, of Greece, of Asia Minor, of Syria, of the land of Judaea, in which is Jerusalem, of the land of Egypt, of Persia and Arabia; but he has lost all, except Greece ...<sup>26</sup>

Even within the shrunken Byzantine empire, Constantinople ceased to hold a pre-eminent position. Other Byzantine cities, particularly Mistra and Thessalonica, had become rival centres of commerce and government. Trebizond on the Black Sea was now the capital of a breakaway empire, independent of the emperor in Constantinople, with its own palace and hierarchy. Constantinople was no longer a great imperial capital and certainly no longer looked like one.

Given the city's isolation in the midst of Turkish territory, it was inevitable that sooner or later the Ottoman sultans would attempt to capture it and so remove what had become an anomalous enclave within their domains. Yet that was easier said than done, for Constantinople's



defences remained intact and as formidable as ever. To start with, the Ottomans had no fleet and so could not make an assault by sea as the Fourth Crusade had done. On the landward side the Theodosian Walls still presented an impenetrable barrier. Sultan Yildirim Bayezid besieged Constantinople for nearly eight years between 1394 and 1402 without success, and an attempt to breach the Land Walls by storm in 1422 was driven off.

Also still intact was the Byzantine belief that Constantinople enjoyed the special protection of God and the Virgin Mary. Soldiers who had fought in the siege of 1422 reported seeing her on the Land Walls in the midst of the fighting and she was generally credited with saving the city on that occasion. Even if the enemy did ever succeed in breaching the Land Walls, it was said, they would only advance as far as the Forum of Constantine. Then an angel would descend from heaven and would present a sword to an unknown man standing by the column. He would lead the counter-attack and drive the invaders from the city. Great store was set on the weekly processions with the icon of the Hodegetria, the visible token that the popular myths were divine promises.<sup>27</sup>

Such pious hopes were overtaken by events. In February 1451, the Ottoman Sultan Murad II suffered an apoplectic fit and died. Some in Constantinople were inclined to rejoice, for Murad had made no secret of his ambition to capture the city and it was he who had launched the attack of 1422. He was succeeded by his young and inexperienced son, Mehmed II (1451–81), who might have been expected to adopt a less aggressive policy, at least until he was more securely settled on the throne. Such naïve hopes were soon disabused. Young Mehmed discerned from the moment of his accession that the only way to make himself secure from overthrow was to pull off a spectacular victory, the capture of Constantinople. Secretive and obsessive, he was consumed day and night with the project he had set himself. Once he summoned his vizier to him in the small hours and complained:

See this pillow? I have passed the whole night dragging it about from one corner of the bedchamber to the other, reclining and rising without sleep. Therefore I say to you, let neither silver nor gold entice you to

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cast aside the resolution you have now given me. Let us struggle steadfastly against the Romans. By placing our trust in the assent of God and in the prayer of the Prophet, we will take the city.

Mehmed went about planning his attack with painstaking thoroughness. He pondered endlessly over various strategies, pored over lists of reserve troops, tax revenues, supplies and weapons and traced out the line of the Land Walls with pen and paper.<sup>28</sup> By the spring of 1452 he was ready to move, but he did not march against Constantinople at once. Instead, he concentrated on building a castle, the so-called Rumeli Hisar, on the European side of the Bosphorus, where the strait was at its narrowest, some way to the north of Constantinople. When it was completed in August, cannon were mounted on the battlements with a view to closing the passage to ships and supplies coming from the Black Sea. Slowly but surely, the sultan was drawing the noose tighter, and in April 1453 he began the siege in earnest, drawing up an Ottoman army of some 80,000 before the Land Walls and bringing a powerful fleet into the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus to maintain the blockade by sea.

Constantinople was now in greater peril than it had ever been before. Invested by land and sea, the Byzantines and their Venetian and Genoese allies were heavily outnumbered. The courtier and statesman George Sphantzes was entrusted by the emperor Constantine XI (1449–53) with assessing the number of able-bodied men available for the defence. Worryingly, he came up with the paltry figure of 4,973.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Mehmed's army still had to face the formidable defences that had foiled so many attackers in the past, including his father Murad in 1422. The Land Walls had never before been breached and Mehmed may well have considered the best strategy to be to aim for a repeat of the success of the Fourth Crusade by storming the Sea Walls along the Golden Horn. This was probably what he had in mind when he manoeuvred his fleet into the Golden Horn by means of a clever stratagem. The ships were beached at Diplokionion and then hauled overland to be relaunched into the Golden Horn. The tactic was not new and had allegedly been tried by some Russian attackers

in the tenth century, but Mehmed's use of it with impunity in 1453 indicates how powerless the Byzantines now were to influence what was happening outside the walls of Constantinople.<sup>30</sup>

In the event, however, the breakthrough was not to occur in the Sea Walls that guarded the Golden Horn but at the Land Walls where no one had ever succeeded before. In the epic sieges of the seventh and eighth centuries, the Byzantines had had a technological advantage over their attackers. Now it was the other way round, as the Ottomans had been able to take advantage of technical advances and equip themselves with cannon. These were by no means new weapons in 1453. They had been used as early as 1347 by the English during their siege of Calais although they were very small devices that had little effect on the town's walls. What was new was the size of the cannon available to Mehmed. The largest of them, constructed by a Hungarian engineer, had a barrel that measured over eight metres long. It was a fairly crude device and so difficult to load that it could only be fired seven times a day, but the cannon balls it fired weighed over 650 kilograms. It was therefore able to have a considerable impact on masonry, even that as mighty as the Land Walls.

Mehmed had this monster gun dragged down from Adrianople by a team of sixty oxen and set up along with a number of others opposite the most vulnerable section of the Land Walls, the *Mesoteichion*, where the fortifications dipped into the valley of the River Lykos. The Greek historian Michael Kritoboulos described the devastating effect that it was to have:

They set fire to it through the short hole behind, igniting the powder. And when this took fire, quicker than it takes to say it, there was a fearful roar first, and a shaking of the earth beneath and for a long way off, and a noise such as was never heard before. Then, with an astounding thunder and a frightful crashing and a flame that lit up all the surroundings and then left them black, the rod, forced out from within by a dry hot blast of air, violently set in motion the stone as it came out. And the stone, borne with tremendous

force and velocity, hit the wall, which it immediately shook and knocked down, and was itself broken into many fragments and scattered, hurling the pieces everywhere and killing those who happened to be nearby. Sometimes it demolished a whole section, and sometimes a half-section, and sometimes a larger or smaller section of a tower, or turret, or battlement. And there was no part of the wall strong enough or resistant enough or thick enough to be able to withstand it ...<sup>31</sup>

Although the defenders were able to make good some of the damage caused by this and other cannon under cover of darkness, as the weeks went by the gaps in the outer wall became more and more apparent. The cannon also took their toll on morale, and the faith of the Byzantines in the certainty of divine protection began to waver. Some remembered a prophecy that Constantinople would fall in 1492, the year 7000 since the creation of the world, and wondered if perhaps the sums had been a few years out. There were ominous signs of divine displeasure. When the icon of the Hodegetria was being processed through the city, it suddenly slipped from the hands of the bearers and fell to the ground from where it proved extremely difficult to raise it. When the procession resumed, it was caught in a violent downpour of rain and hail, which threatened to sweep away the small children and against which it was impossible to go on. The next day, a dense fog covered the whole city, and some said that this was a token of the divine presence wrapping itself in cloud as it abandoned Constantinople to its fate.<sup>32</sup>

So in the event it proved. After six weeks of bombardment, the gaps in the wall to the south of the Gate of Adrianople were large enough for Mehmed to decide on a full-scale attack. On the night of 28–29 May 1453, his elite Janissary troops broke through after heavy fighting. The last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI, was killed in the ensuing struggle, and by morning the Ottomans were in control of the city.<sup>33</sup> As in 1204, there followed the inevitable sack of the city as its churches and private houses were ransacked for anything of value:

Costly apparel, silver, gold, copper and tin vessels, and books beyond number ... Innumerable books were loaded onto the wagons and hauled in all directions; they were dispersed throughout East and West. For a single gold coin, ten books were sold – the works of Aristotle and Plato, books of theological content and on every subject. Gold and silver were pulled from the evangelisteries which were adorned with many different jewels; some were sold and the rest were thrown away. All the icons were thrown to the flames ...<sup>34</sup>

Among the icons to perish was the Hodegetria. In the days before the final assault, it had been brought from the Great Palace to Metochites's church of the Chora to be close to the walls at the time of crisis. Turkish troops reached the church very shortly after the first breakthrough had occurred, and the icon was grabbed and hacked with its precious golden frame into four pieces which were then shared among the looters. The commodity that was most in demand, however, was people since captives could command a high price as slaves. Indeed, many of the victors later expressed annoyance that so many of the inhabitants had been killed, thus robbing them of the chance of profit.<sup>35</sup> Thousands of the city's inhabitants were rounded up and sold into slavery from which their only hope of redemption was if their relatives were able to buy them back with a huge ransom.

As in the case of the sack of 1204, however, it was not the pillage itself that did the damage but what came after. Indeed Mehmed was at pains to limit the ravages committed by his troops in the aftermath of victory. When the sultan entered Constantinople in the early afternoon of 29 May, he was allegedly taken aback at the destruction that had been wrought:

[He] looked about to see its great size, its situation, its grandeur and beauty, its teeming population, its loveliness, and the costliness of its churches and public buildings, and of the private houses and community

houses and those of the officials ... When he saw what a large number had been killed, and the ruin of the buildings, and the wholesale ruin and destruction of the city, he was filled with compassion and repented not a little at the destruction and plundering. Tears fell from his eyes as he groaned deeply and passionately: 'What a city we have given over to plundering and destruction!'<sup>36</sup>

Arriving at the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, Mehmed was quick to announce its conversion to a mosque, and on his orders one of his attendants climbed into the pulpit and proclaimed that there was no God but God. When Mehmed discovered one of his soldiers smashing the marble pavement of the floor, he struck him with his sword and announced that while the troops could take the captives and the booty, the buildings were his.<sup>37</sup> Wholesale destruction was not Mehmed's intention by any means.

Yet the sad truth, as Mehmed soon discovered, was that he had conquered 'a city of ruins', with many of the great palaces, churches and monasteries already in an advanced state of dilapidation.<sup>38</sup> There was clearly much to be done if the city was to become the impressive new capital of his empire, and that meant that many of the old Byzantine buildings had to go. One of the first victims was the great church of the Holy Apostles, which had long been in a poor state of repair. Mehmed decided to use its site for a new mosque and a splendid tomb for himself. The church was duly demolished and the magnificent Mosque of the Conqueror was erected in its place between 1462 and 1470.<sup>39</sup> Other churches and monasteries were taken over for other uses. The monastery of the Pantokrator was handed over to some fullers, St Eirene became an armoury and St George of Mangana became the abode of Dervishes. Others provided living space for newly arrived Turkish families.<sup>40</sup>

Some churches did remain in the hands of the conquered Byzantine population, but in the long run these too tended to be turned into mosques. The Virgin Pammakaristos became the seat of the patriarch of Constantinople after 1462, but by 1588 that too had become a mosque.<sup>41</sup> By the early years of the eighteenth century, only three of the Byzantine

churches of Constantinople were still used for Christian worship. One of them was the little thirteenth-century church of the Virgin of the Mongols (Mouchliotissa) which survived because it could prove that Mehmed II had granted the church in perpetuity to the Byzantine architect who had built the Mosque of the Conqueror.<sup>42</sup>

The other Byzantine monuments were either destroyed or slowly decayed as the years went by. The palaces of the Byzantine emperors, already in an advanced state of disrepair before the conquest, did not long survive it. Mehmed II at once ordered the construction of a new palace, and the Great Palace site was abandoned. In 1609 any traces of it were removed to make way for the construction of the Mosque of Sultan Ahmed, better known as the Blue Mosque. The Palace of Blachernae, out on the edge of the city, survived longer but only as ruins, and most of those had gone by the 1540s.<sup>43</sup> The column of Theodosius, from which Mourtzouphlos had plummeted to his death, was demolished in about 1500 to make way for some new bath houses. The huge statue of Justinian which stood in the Augousteion outside Hagia Sophia was taken down in the 1540s so that its metal could be used in casting cannon. The column of Arcadius lasted longer, though in the end it became decidedly unsafe and it too was demolished. Many churches, such as the Virgin Peribleptos and St George of Mangana, simply crumbled and disappeared as the years went by, their marble columns and pavements carted away for use in new buildings.<sup>44</sup>

The conversion of a church into a mosque meant at least that the building survived, but the change of use was often followed by the mutilation or destruction of its mosaic decoration since pictorial representations of the human figure were incompatible with strict Islamic views on idolatry. The Turkish writer Khoja (1539–99) exulted that ‘the churches that were within the city were emptied of their vile idols and cleansed of their filthy and idolatrous impurities’, but there does not seem to have been a systematic policy of destroying the mosaics. Often they were just whitewashed over or left to decay gradually over the years. Those in the dome of Hagia Sophia could be seen in 1597, although they were rather the worse for wear and had in some cases been defaced. Some were still visible as late as 1718.<sup>45</sup>

Along with the churches, the columns and the palaces, other features of the Byzantine city disappeared one by one. The classical statues that remained in the city had little chance of survival, for the Turks had much less tolerance of them and their pagan associations than the Byzantines had had. One sixteenth-century visitor recorded that some workmen had accidentally dug up a statue of an armed soldier but almost at once they smashed it to pieces with hammers.

When we showed our annoyance, the workmen laughed at us and asked whether we wished, in accordance with our custom, to worship and pray to it.<sup>46</sup>

Not everyone was blind to the beauties of the works of the ancients. One Turkish pasha brought back a bronze statue of Hercules as part of the booty from a campaign in Hungary and had it set up in the Hippodrome. After his death, however, it was almost immediately pulled down and sent to the furnace. The ox and lion at the harbour of Boukoleon was still there in 1532 but it too disappeared in the years that followed. Only the serpent column in the centre of the Hippodrome survived.<sup>47</sup>

Alongside the destruction of the Byzantine legacy, a new city had arisen, no less splendid, in which the columns were replaced by minarets, and the crosses on the domes of the churches by crescents. Like their Byzantine predecessors, Ottoman sultans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries vied with each other to display their piety and wealth by building at least one *küllüye*, a complex of religious, educational and charitable buildings, of which a mosque was the central feature. One of the most striking of these is the vast Süleymaniye, built between 1550 and 1557 for Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–66). The huge dome of the central mosque is surrounded by no less than 400 smaller domes that cover a hospital, an orphanage, a soup kitchen, an insane asylum, a library, baths, a hospice for travellers, and Süleyman's own tomb. Between the buildings are colonnaded courtyards with fountains. Constantinople had once more become a grandiose imperial capital, albeit of a different empire.



There were still curious visitors to Constantinople who searched behind the façade of the new for lingering traces of the Byzantine past. Among them was an Englishman, George Sandys (1578–1644), who was finding refuge in travel from an unhappy, arranged marriage and a pending lawsuit brought by his wife's relatives. As his ship sailed into the Golden Horn in the autumn of 1610, Sandys was delighted with the view from the deck:

There is hardly in nature a more delicate object, if beheld from the sea or adjoining mountains: the loftie and beautifull cypresse trees so entermixed with the buildings that it seemeth to present a city in a wood to the pleased beholders. Whose seven aspiring heads (for on so many hils and no more, they say it is seated) are most of them crowned with magnificent mosques, all of white marble, round in forme ....<sup>48</sup>

Sandys lodged in Galata, in the house of the English ambassador, Sir Thomas Glover, and from there began his explorations of the city. It is clear from his account that his interest was in Constantinople's Byzantine past rather than its Ottoman present. He considered that Hagia Sophia 'exceedeth all not onely the rest' of the mosques but even 'all other fabricks whatsoever throughout the whole universe'. On his visit to the building, he experienced something of what a medieval visitor would have seen, for the dome was still 'adorned with mosaike painting' of 'inexpressable state-liness'. He found too that many of the old Byzantine superstitions lived on. The Turks were accustomed to wipe their handkerchiefs on one of the columns of the former cathedral as they believed that the condensation that it exuded had curative powers.

When he had finished in Hagia Sophia, Sandys ambled over to the Hippodrome. The banks of seating had by now disappeared under the houses which ringed the open space, leading Sandys to compare the Hippodrome to Smithfield Market in London. Still there, however, were the column with its three serpent heads, the Egyptian obelisk of the emperor Theodosius and the column of Constantine Porphyrogenitos which Sandys described as a 'colossus built of sun dry stone'.

Elsewhere he remarked the column of Arcadius, 'farre surpassing both Trajan's and that of Antonius, which I have seene in Rome', and within the gateway of the Topkapi palace he visited a church, probably that of St Eirene, which still contained many of the weapons taken from the defeated Byzantines in 1453. He even found some remnants of the Great Palace, though they had now been converted into 'a stable for wilde beasts'.

In spite of all these discoveries, Sandys was disappointed with Constantinople, concluding as he departed in January 1611 aboard the *Trinity* of London that 'there is not in the world an object that promiseth so much a far off to the beholders, and entred so deceiveth expectations'. What saddened him most was that the Byzantine monuments that he had seen were 'all the remains that are left ... of so many goodly buildings, and from all parts congested antiquities, wherewith this sovereign city was in past times so adorned'. Along with the buildings, he discovered, had perished all memory of the society that had constructed them so that even the local Greeks were completely ignorant of the history of their forebears.<sup>49</sup>

A more positive assessment was made by the Frenchman Pierre Gilles (1490–1555) who spent several years in Constantinople during the 1540s. He was certainly distressed that 'the inhabitants are daily demolishing, effacing and utterly destroying the small remains of Antiquity'. He did have a stroke of luck, though, in rediscovering a Byzantine monument that had been lost and forgotten for generations. Wandering in the area behind the mosque of Hagia Sophia, he noticed that the local people were able to draw up freshwater fish from their wells. It so happened that Gilles met a man whose house had a secret passage that led down to a subterranean world in which a vast lake stretched away into the darkness beyond the flickering light cast by a flaming torch. The owner of the house produced a small skiff and rowed Gilles through a forest of columns that held up a towering vaulted roof while the shadowy shapes of large carp moved in the waters beneath. The Frenchman realized that he had stumbled upon nothing less than the Basilika cistern which had been built by Justinian to keep Byzantine Constantinople supplied with water and whose very existence was now unsuspected by the people living above.

*Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*

Perhaps it was the thrill of this discovery that prompted Gilles to end his account on a rather more positive note than Sandys. For him, the loss of Constantinople's ancient and Byzantine past was deeply saddening but it was balanced by an element of continuity:

I shall end with this reflection; that though all other cities have their periods of government, and are subject to the decay of time, Constantinople alone seems to claim to herself a kind of immortality and will continue a city, as long as the race of mankind shall live either to inhabit or rebuild her.<sup>50</sup>

That thought still holds good today.

## CHAPTER 10

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# *Epilogue: Byzantine Constantinople Today*

The proof of Gilles's words is apparent to any visitor to Constantinople in the early twenty-first century. The city has moved on once more and is now officially known as Istanbul, the largest city, but not the capital, of the Turkish republic. It is a huge and sprawling metropolis of some sixteen million people, whose suburbs extend far beyond the limits of the narrow promontory alongside the Golden Horn. They stretch up both sides of the Bosphorus towards the Black Sea, westwards out towards the airport, and on the Asian side along the Sea of Marmara almost as far as Izmit, or Nikomedia as it once was. Beyond Galata, tall, gleaming towers provide office space for banks and multinational companies. Within this metropolitan area, traffic congestion frequently reaches gridlock, particularly in the old city and on the approaches to the two mighty bridges which now link Europe with Asia across the Bosphorus.

Given that so much of Byzantine Constantinople had vanished even when Pierre Gilles visited during the sixteenth century, it might be supposed that no traces at all would be left to see now that the developers and financiers have moved in. It is true that, within the old city, many of the great monuments of the Byzantine era have disappeared completely. Gone forever are St George of Mangana with its towering church, hospital and extensive gardens, the Milion Arch, the Brazen Gate, and the breathtaking audience chamber in the Magnavra hall of the Great Palace. No traces at all remain above ground of the great mansions and palaces of grandees like Niketas Choniates and

Theodore Metochites, and the columns of Theodosius and Arcadius no longer tower over the rooftops.

Yet in spite of all that has been lost and all that has since been built to cover over the traces, echoes of the past still linger, even in the city's new name. The change to Istanbul was instituted by the founder of the Turkish republic, Kemal Atatürk (1871–1938) in a conscious attempt to distance the city from its Byzantine and Ottoman past. Ironically Istanbul is not a Turkish word at all but of Greek origin and was already in use in Byzantine times as one of Constantinople's many epithets. It is derived from the Greek words '*eis tin polin*', meaning 'to the city'.<sup>1</sup> For all its modernity, Istanbul has a Byzantine name.

Moreover, thanks to the constant expansion of Istanbul, more traces of the past are coming to light all the time. As new buildings are constructed, the bulldozers often turn up features that have been covered up for centuries. The reconstruction of the Palace of Justice near the Hippodrome during the 1960s revealed the stone base of one of the statues that had once adorned the stadium. Of the statue itself, however, there was no sign. It may have been one of those melted down during the period of Latin rule. In the Balat area, close to where the Palace of Blachernae once stood, the remains of an impressive mansion have been found, no doubt the house of some high official like Theodore Metochites. It had its own bath house, complete with hypocaust heating. The demolition of a building in 1998 revealed the brick substructure of what had once been the church and monastery of the Virgin Peribleptos in the south of the city, the foundation of Romanos III (1028–34) who thought that 'nothing in the whole world was good enough for this church'.<sup>2</sup>

Even more sensational is an unwitting discovery made during construction of a tunnel under the Bosphorus designed to carry 75,000 passengers an hour on fast metro trains. On the plot of land marked out for a huge interchange station at Yenikapı on the southern side of the old city, archaeologists are racing against time to investigate what appears to be one of the small harbours that stood along Constantinople's southern shore, similar to that at Boukoleon where the imperial galley was moored. Seven sunken ships have been found buried in the mud, along with mosaics, ceramics, coins and thousand-year-old

shipping ropes and anchors all preserved in almost perfect condition. There is also a subterranean stone tunnel, nearly two metres across, leading from the harbour. What it was for and where it leads remains an intriguing mystery.<sup>3</sup>

Quite apart from new discoveries, echoes of Byzantium can also be found just by walking the streets of Istanbul. For the visitor can still enter the old city through the opening in the Land Walls known as the Gate of Adrianople, just as the visitors of 1200 did.<sup>4</sup> These days the area is known as Edirne Kapısı, but it means the same, *Edirne* being the Turkish name for Adrianople and *kapı* the word for 'gate'. The gate itself is gone, and is replaced by a large gap in the walls that lets in two lanes of thunderous traffic. On either side of the Gate of Adrianople, the Land Walls still stretch from the Golden Horn to the Sea of Marmara, although inevitably they bear the scars of the years. While the tall towers and the inner wall are mostly intact, the outer wall is in much worse condition and the moat, stockade and outworks have largely disappeared. The section between the Gate of Adrianople and the Gate of St Romanos still bears the marks of Mehmed's cannon, and the Land Walls suffered further damage in the earthquake of 17 August 1999. Somewhat controversially, parts of the walls have been rebuilt in recent years, though this may be the only way to preserve them. Whatever view one takes of that, the Land Walls remain one of the great sights of Byzantine Constantinople, their towers standing sentinel as far as the eye can see as they have done for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

It is still possible to go from the Gate of Adrianople to the Hippodrome on foot, for Fevzi Paşa Caddesi more or less follows the route of the old Mese. It is not a particularly congenial walk, passing through some very busy and congested streets, but the route does pass a number of important Byzantine sites. To the north of the Adrianople Gate, there are some traces of that other residence of the Byzantine emperors, the Palace of Blachernae. Much of what remains is underground, a series of chambers which may have served as storerooms or dungeons. All that can be seen above ground are some towers. One is named after Isaac II Angelos because it bears an inscription recording that he had it repaired in 1188. Isaac is also reputed to have spent part of his time of imprisonment in the tower before he was restored to power

in 1203, though there is no contemporary evidence to support that. Nearby is another Byzantine building, known now as Tefkur Sarayı, which may have been a later addition to the palace, and the site of the church of the Virgin in Blachernae where the robe or *maphorion* of the Virgin Mary was kept. The church and the robe have long gone, but the spring that flows there is still a place of pilgrimage. The whole area is still surrounded by the walls that were rebuilt during the twelfth century to reduce the vulnerability of the Blachernae 'bulge'.<sup>6</sup>

Heading east from the Edirne Kapı, the road passes just to the south of a former mosque known as Kariye Camii. This was originally the church of Holy Saviour in Chora, all that remains of the monastery that once surrounded it. The building houses some of the best surviving Byzantine art in Istanbul, mostly dating from the early fourteenth century when the church was refurbished by Theodore Metochites. The church was thoroughly looted on the morning of 29 May and the icon of the Hodegetria which was housed there was hacked to pieces, but its mosaics and frescoes were spared and some of them remained visible throughout its time as a mosque. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, much of the fresco decoration was whitewashed over and this had the effect of preserving it until 1948 when the building became a museum and the surviving artwork was restored to its former glory.<sup>7</sup>

On entering the church, the visitor is confronted with a mosaic portrait of Metochites himself, bearded in the Byzantine fashion, wearing an elaborate robe and sporting a flamboyant hat. The chief minister is shown kneeling before Christ, offering him the church that he had restored at such great expense. The ceilings of the narthaxes or entrance halls are covered with mosaics depicting the life of Christ and of the Virgin Mary. To the right of the entrance is the side chapel where Metochites's tomb can still be seen, along with the fresco depictions of the Resurrection and Last Judgement whose figures, far from the stiff poses of mosaics, seem almost to move. Most impressive of all is the Harrowing of Hell in the apse of the chapel, showing the risen Christ dragging Adam and Eve out of Hades while Satan lies bound at his feet. It is a sobering thought, however, that magnificent though these mosaics and frescoes are, they are only chance survivals.

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In its heyday, Constantinople possessed a score of churches far more magnificent than this. Such is the extent of our loss.

Returning to Fevzi Paşa Caddesi, the road heads east and passes the site of the church of the Holy Apostles. There is almost nothing now remaining of the church, although an archaeological survey in 2001 did unearth what may be the base of some of its walls.<sup>8</sup> Gone too are the tombs of the Byzantine emperors in the mausoleum attached to the church. Some of their marble sarcophagi may have survived the demolition of the church, however, for they can still be seen outside the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, though which emperors originally occupied them is anyone's guess.<sup>9</sup> The site is now occupied by the mosque of the Conqueror (Fatih Camii), not, unfortunately, that built by Mehmed II but a replacement constructed in 1771 after the original had been flattened by an earthquake.

Beyond Fatih Camii, the road passes what remains of the Aqueduct of Valens on the left and on the right the ruins of the church of St Polyeuktos, a sixth-century basilica. Hidden away in a nearby side street is a survivor of the many columns that once used to dot the skyline, that of Marcian (Kız taşı) that once supported an equestrian statue of the emperor of that name. From here, the road eventually links up with Ordu Caddesi in the approximate area of the Forum of Theodosius. Although the column of Theodosius no longer stands, some fragments of the triumphal arch that stood in the forum do survive and lie piled up on the right-hand side of the road, close to the busy Aksaray bus station. Ordu Caddesi leads on to the column of Constantine (Çemberlitaş) marking the site of the Forum of Constantine. The column is held together by iron hoops as it has been since the sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

After Constantine's column, the road descends to Sultanahmet square which is the site of the Augousteion and is still an open space dividing Hagia Sophia from the Hippodrome (At Meydanı). The latter can be traced rather than seen. The banks of seating have all gone but it is easy enough to see where the racetrack would have been. The central spine can also be discerned, for it is still marked by three monuments that were there in Byzantine times, the Egyptian Obelisk of Theodosius, the serpent column of Delphi and the column of



Constantine Porphyrogenitos. The last two, however, are no longer at their best. The Serpent column has been reduced to just a stump. The serpent heads have disappeared, apart from the upper jaw of one serpent which is in the Archaeological Museum.<sup>11</sup> The column of Constantine Porphyrogenitos has lost the bronze cladding which once covered it and is now just a rather enigmatic white pyramid.

The Great Palace which stood next to the Hippodrome is no longer there and its site is covered by the Blue Mosque. There are, however, two small fragments of it remaining. The nearby mosaic museum houses parts of a mosaic pavement from the Great Palace that was unearthed during an archaeological excavation in 1935. The pavement depicts scenes of mischievous boys, animals and hunts. It may possibly have formed the walkway from the palace to the Kathisma, the imperial box overlooking the Hippodrome. Another fragment of the palace can be found down the hill from the Hippodrome, a section of wall punctuated by three large marble-framed windows and a gateway. This probably formed part of the complex known as the Palace of Boukoleon and would have been situated close to or on the waterfront, giving access via a marble staircase to the harbour where the imperial galley was moored. In 1959, however, the shallow waters at this point were filled in to permit the building of a new road, Kennedy Caddesi, along the shoreline so that the palace wall now stands back some way from the Sea of Marmara.<sup>12</sup>

The best-known Byzantine monument was and is the cathedral of Hagia Sophia (Aya Sofya) which still stands across the Augousteion from the Hippodrome. Outwardly it is little changed, although minarets and a number of small buildings were erected close to it during the period when it was a mosque. It is now a museum, and its interior is a far gloomier and darker place than it ever was in Byzantine times. Most of the mosaic decoration that was once its glory has disappeared although a few isolated examples survive, including the portraits of Constantine IX Monomachos and Zoe and of John II Komnenos and his wife Eirene. Even without its mosaics, however, Hagia Sophia can still impress by its sheer size and by the way the dome seems to hover over the nave with no visible means of support.

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Other Byzantine buildings can be seen scattered throughout the city. A significant number of churches survive, though some are in poor condition. The church of the monastery of St John Stoudios (Imrahor Camii), where Michael V met his fate in 1042 and Symeon the New Theologian was excessively pious, still stands. During the nineteenth century it was in good enough condition to be recommended as an essential stop for visitors, but in 1894 it was seriously damaged by an earthquake which left it little more than a roofless shell. One striking feature does remain: the church's marble pavement which depicts animals and, curiously enough, scenes from classical mythology.<sup>13</sup> The church of Christ Pantokrator (Zeyrek Camii) which was founded by John II Komnenos in the 1130s as the centrepiece for his monastery and hospital, and as a place of burial for members of his family, was once one of the best-known and most magnificent churches of Constantinople. These days it is rather dilapidated and nothing remains of the tombs of the Komnenian emperors or of the mosaic decoration that once must have covered the walls. The church has, however, retained its wonderful inlaid mosaic floor, a carved doorway and traces of its stained glass, and a programme of restoration and research on the building has now begun.<sup>14</sup>

Others are in better repair, often because they are still working mosques. Among these is the Küçük Ayasofya mosque which was once the church of St Sergius and St Bacchus. Built by Justinian in around 536, it stands to the south of Hagia Sophia and has a distinctive pumpkin-shaped dome. Inside, there is everything one would expect to find in a mosque, from the mimbar or pulpit to the mihrab indicating the direction of Mecca. Rather incongruously, however, a carved inscription in Greek runs the length of the gallery, praising 'our sceptred Justinian' who 'honours with a splendid abode the servant of Christ, Creator of all things, Sergius'.<sup>15</sup> The Gül mosque which stands close to the Golden Horn has been tentatively identified as the church of St Theodosia, dedicated to the lady who had her throat cut with a ram's horn after rushing to the aid of the icon on the Brazen Gate. The Kalenderhane mosque was once the church of the Virgin Kyriotissa that was probably built by Alexios III, and the Fenari Isa mosque is probably the Virgin Tou Libos. Eski Imaret mosque was the church

of Christ the All-Seeing or Pantepoptes, which was built by Anna Dalassena, the formidable mother of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, sometime before 1087. It lies tucked away in the streets behind the mosque of the Conqueror and it was close to this church that Alexios V Mourtzouphlos stationed himself in April 1204 when preparing to do battle with the attacking fleet of the Fourth Crusade. Although converted into a mosque very shortly after the Turkish conquest, the building still preserves its gallery which would have been reserved for the Empress Anna and her entourage.<sup>16</sup>

In churches discussed so far, there survives little or any of what would have been one of their most striking features: their mosaic and fresco decoration. A relatively complete cycle of mosaics does still exist, however, in the Virgin All-Blessed or Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii), perhaps because the church did not become a mosque until the late sixteenth century. The mosaics date from the early fourteenth century, when the building was refurbished by the Byzantine general Michael Glabas, and so are contemporary with those in the Chora church. The Pammakaristos has, however, been closed up for several years now and it is very difficult to gain admission.<sup>17</sup>

Not all the Byzantine churches of Istanbul are now mosques. While St Saviour in Chora and Hagia Sophia became museums after a period as mosques, Justinian's church of St Eirene (Aya Irini), the largest surviving Byzantine church in Istanbul after Hagia Sophia, has never been either. After the Turkish conquest it served as an arsenal for the elite Janissaries until they were disbanded in 1826. Nowadays it is used as an exhibition and concert venue. Then there is the tiny Virgin of the Mongols or Mouchliotissa which has the distinction of being the only Byzantine church in Istanbul which is still used for its original purpose. Built in the late thirteenth century, during the reign of Andronicus II, it provides the setting for the celebration of the Greek Orthodox liturgy, a rite almost unchanged since Byzantine times.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from churches, two of the cisterns that stored water and made Constantinople independent of outside supplies are still in existence. One, the cistern of a thousand and one columns (Binbirdirek), mis-named as there are only 244, has recently been restored and reopened as a shopping arcade. The other, the Basilika cistern (Yerebatan Sarnıcı), that

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extraordinary vaulted structure of 336 columns, has been restored and opened to the public. A visit these days can hardly hope to reproduce the thrill of discovery experienced by Pierre Gilles when he first beheld the forest of columns by torchlight. Nevertheless the sheer size of this subterranean space cannot fail to amaze and the cistern preserves two of the few survivors of the hundreds of classical statues and sculptures that once adorned Byzantine Constantinople. In the far left-hand corner are two square slabs of marble carved as Gorgons' heads. Probably originally from some dismantled pagan temple, they were reused during Justinian's reign to provide bases for two of the columns in the cistern and have remained there ever since.<sup>19</sup>

While the Land Walls, churches and cisterns provide the most obvious reminders of Byzantium, there are all kinds of other fragments scattered throughout Istanbul. Though not as impressive as the Land Walls, some stretches of the Sea Walls survive. The longest stretch is to be found along Kennedy Caddesi, and one of the towers still stands intact some 200 metres above the Galata bridge over the Golden Horn. Other fragments can be seen along the Golden Horn and the southern shoreline. Many of these fragments still carry Greek inscriptions recording the restoration of the wall by Theophilos (829–42), such as this one:

Possessing Thee, O Christ, a Wall that cannot be broken,  
Theophilos, emperor and pious autocrat, erected  
this wall upon new foundations: which, Lord of All,  
guard with Thy might, and display to the end of time  
standing unshaken and unmoved.<sup>20</sup>

There are many other structures that are clearly Byzantine in origin scattered around Istanbul, such as the crumbling monumental base of the column of Arcadius which lies covered in ivy in Haseki Kadın Sokak. In the case of many other remains, their identity and even the precise function is a complete mystery. In Cemal Nadir Sokak, a street that lies in an area to the north of the Forum of Constantine that was known in Byzantine times as Sphorakion, there is an intriguing Byzantine substructure. It comprises twelve rooms and passages of various shapes and sizes. There is a substantial central hall, some six metres

high, whose roof is supported by two rows of six columns. Clearly, these are the remains of a very impressive building indeed, but at the present time there is no clue as to what it was.<sup>21</sup>

Byzantine traces can also be seen in the great Ottoman buildings of the city. In the mosque complex of the Süleymaniye, the columns of porphyry marble that hold up the porticoes were reused from an earlier Byzantine building, possibly some part of the Great Palace. Many of those which line the inner courtyard of the Blue Mosque can be traced back to the Hippodrome. Other broken bits and pieces have found their way to the city's museums. The Military Museum, for example, preserves some links from the chain that was stretched across the Golden Horn during the last siege of 1453. The Archaeological Museum houses, among other artefacts from the period, the St Francis frescoes from the church of the Virgin Kyriotissa that probably date from the Latin occupation of 1204–61 and two fifth-century marble pedestals honouring the popular charioteer Porphyrius that were found in the Hippodrome. Perhaps most poignant of all are the two stone lions which flank one of the museum's staircases. They used to stand on some remnants of the Palace of Boukoleon which overlooked the harbour of the same name. These ruins were demolished in 1871 but the lions were preserved. Dating from the sixth century, they must once have looked down on the marble steps that led to the mooring for the imperial galley and watched the emperors as they came and went.<sup>22</sup>

While something of Byzantine Constantinople can still be found in modern Istanbul, the problem remains that many of the Byzantine monuments stand isolated among the intensive urban development that has taken place around them. The tenth-century church of the Myrelaion (Bodrum Camii), for example, is now closely hemmed in on all sides by buildings, such is the pressure on space for housing. As a result, it is by no means easy to find the church that Romanos I Lekapenos built as his own burial place, and the same applies to many of the other Byzantine churches. With the possible exception of the Hippodrome and Sultanahmet square, Istanbul has no Byzantine equivalent of the Acropolis in Athens or the Forum in Rome, a dedicated space set aside from the everyday life of the city to preserve an important aspect of its past.

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There is, however, another way to form an idea of Byzantine Constantinople and that is to visit Venice. The two cities had been closely intertwined for centuries, from the time when Venice was an outpost of Byzantine rule in Italy, through the years when Venice dominated Constantinople's overseas trade, to the last days of Byzantium in 1453 when Venetian volunteers fought on the walls alongside the Byzantines against the Ottomans. This long association was bound to leave its mark on Venice. Furthermore while Constantinople experienced two catastrophic sacks in 1204 and 1453, followed by intense urban development in the twentieth century, all of which effaced much of the legacy of the past, Venice has been largely left as it was. Venice may lack the youthful vibrancy of the streets of Istanbul but its medieval buildings are still intact.

Part of the visible Byzantine influence in Venice can be seen in those buildings. In the days when Byzantium was the superpower and Venice the client state, it was only natural that Byzantine styles in art and architecture should be followed by those who wanted to make an impression. The rulers of Venice even brought in artists from Constantinople to work on the mosaic decoration of their churches. The most prominent surviving monument to this period is the church of St Mark itself. Completed in 1064, its interior mosaic decoration is clearly influenced by Byzantine styles, and may even have been the work of Byzantine artists. Byzantine influence is visible on the outside too. The church has five domes, arranged in the form of a cross, and may therefore reflect the architecture of the now vanished church of the Holy Apostles.<sup>23</sup> Venice may also provide a clue to the appearance of secular buildings in Constantinople, particularly the houses of great magnates such as Niketas Choniates and Theodore Metochites. Several of the palaces along the Grand Canal in Venice, such as Enrico Dandolo's Palazzo Farsetti, were built in the medieval period, and with their loggias and the rounded arches of their windows probably reflect Byzantine models.

As well as reflecting Byzantine architectural and artistic influence, Venice is full of objects brought from Constantinople in the wake of the Fourth Crusade. Many are housed in the treasury of St Mark's but others are visible outside. The most famous are the four bronze horses

that stand on the façade of St Mark's but were originally sited in the Hippodrome. These days, thanks to the pollution drifting across the lagoon from the chemical plants at Mestre, the horses on the façade are replicas and the originals are kept inside the church. Below the façade, close to the entrance to the Palace of the Doges in St Mark's Square, stand four enigmatic figures made of porphyry marble, clasping each other around the shoulders. For a long time in the later Middle Ages it was said that these were four impious Saracens who had been turned to stone for trying to rob the treasury of St Mark's. Later art historians suspected that the group was of Constantinopolitan manufacture and depicted a group of imperial rulers, possibly either the Tetrarchs who divided the empire between them under Diocletian or else the sons of Constantine. Their origin in Constantinople was confirmed in 1965, when an excavation at the Myrelaion monastery in Istanbul unearthed a porphyry foot which exactly matched that missing from one of the figures in Venice. The four figures, like the horses above, were probably carted back in triumph in 1204.<sup>24</sup>

Some of these plundered objects have poignancy all of their own. One is the icon of the Virgin Mary that sits above the altar in a side chapel of St Mark's. This is reputedly the icon known as the Bringer of Victory (*Nikopeia*) that had for centuries been carried by the Byzantine emperors into battle and was credited with Basil II's victory at Abydos in April 989. It may even have been that which was lost by Alexios V Mourtzouphlos early in 1204 when he unsuccessfully clashed with a party of crusaders led by Henry of Flanders. Whether this is true or not can never now be known, but the icon is clearly Byzantine and highly enough prized to be enclosed in a jewelled and enamelled frame.<sup>25</sup>

Another relic of Byzantium is hidden away, far from busy St Mark's Square, in the quiet Campiello de Ca'Angaran close to the church of San Pantalon. On a wall above two doorways is a large marble roundel bearing the sculpted image of a bearded Byzantine emperor. In his right hand he holds a sceptre and in his left, like the statue of Justinian in the Augousteion, a crowned orb. Behind him a sunburst pattern suggests his radiance and glory. How it came to be in this obscure corner of Venice will never now be known. Some returning mariner,

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perhaps, carried it home and fixed it onto the wall of his house to let posterity know that he was there when Constantinople was conquered in 1204. Nor is there any certainty as to who the emperor depicted on it might be. The roundel gives no clue to his name, but since it dates from the twelfth century it might well be Alexios I Komnenos or Isaac II or even Alexios III Angelos whose adventures have been traced in this book.<sup>26</sup> Whoever he is, the emperor stands in that secluded spot summer and winter, keeping his lonely vigil, a perpetual exile from the Queen of Cities.



# Notes

## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> See the arguments of Averil Cameron, 'The exotic mirage', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 21 September 1990, pp. 13–15.
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## Chapter 1

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## Chapter 2

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## Chapter 3

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## Chapter 4

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## Chapter 7

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## Chapter 8

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